Lea Doué
Hansel
and the
Gingerbread Queen
A Villain's Ever After

Hansel and the Gingerbread Queen:
A Retelling of Hansel and Gretel
(A Villain's Ever After)
Lea Doué

Table of Contents

Title Page

Hansel and the Gingerbread Queen (A Villain's Ever After)

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Firethorn Chronicles:

The Firethorn Crown

The Midsummer Captives

The Red Dragon Girl

The Moonflower Dance

The Sleeping Curse (upcoming)

The Sorcerer Prince (upcoming)

Novelettes and Short Stories

Snapdragon

Sweet Basil

Red Orchid

Fairytale Dragon Riders:

Mirrors and Pearls: A Retelling of Snow White

Hansel and the Gingerbread Queen: A Retelling of Hansel and Gretel

(also part of A Villain's Ever After series)

Hansel and the Gingerbread Queen: A Retelling of Hansel and Gretel
(A Villain's Ever After)
Copyright © 2021 by Lea Doué
Butterwing Publishing
Cover by Moorbooks Design
moorbooksdesign.com
Editing by Laurel Garver
laurelgarver.blogspot.com
All rights reserved. No part of this story may be used, reproduced, or transmitted by any means, electronic or mechanical, without written permission of the author, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.
This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.
ISBN (print) 978-1-989606-01-8
ISBN (ebook) 978-1-989606-02-5

In Memory of Gumma (and her memorable sweets)
and to her sweet grandchildren (all dozen of them!):
Chris, Sandra, Spencer, Sam, Sarah,
Amanda, Daniel, Raye,
Hannah, Ella, Caleb, Seth

Chapter One

Witch! Here comes the witch! The witch is back!

The whispered words echoed in Evony's mind as she stopped at the sprawling oak a half mile from the village and draped her donkey's sodden lead rope over a bush. She steeled herself, knowing she would hear the words again soon, spoken by people who had never seen her real face and who didn't even know she existed.

Until four months ago, the witch had been Evony's mother, a supposed childless old crone from the forest with an unsavory interest in magic. But contrary to what was doubtless shared during fireside tales, her mother hadn't been childless or old, although she *had* lived in the deep woods and practiced dangerous magic. The tales did not yet tell how it had proven to be her downfall.

Evony unclasped her damp cloak, laid it over the donkey's pack, and then removed a wooden spoon from her apron pocket. Her mother's spoon, and no ordinary one at that. She raised her arm and twirled the spoon directly over her head in a small circular motion. No special words were needed for the spell, except to guide the outcome of the magic.

"Witch," she whispered, hating the taste of the word on her tongue.

Golden sparkles swirled in the air above her, like coarse pixie dust, and then settled over her hair and shoulders, sprinkling their way down her sleeves and skirt. Once she was thoroughly coated in the twinkling specks, each one poofed into oblivion with a flash of yellow light.

The donkey sneezed and nuzzled her hand for a treat, apparently unconcerned that in place of his young mistress with silky red hair stood a wizened old woman with jagged nails and patched skirts.

Evony threw the cloak back over her shoulders and then fished a carrot out of the pack and handed it to him. "Perhaps one of these days, I'll enter without the magic and introduce myself," she told him.

Wouldn't it be grand to have a human friend her own age? But for now, she must use her mother's disguise and make her monthly appearance in the village, or else risk raising too many questions. She couldn't have curiosity drawing anyone to her home when she was so close to her goal.

Another brief downpour caught her on the last leg of her journey. She tied the donkey to a tree at the outskirts of the village and then entered with an empty basket over her arm.

"The witch!" someone yelled, and a door slammed. People whispered behind flattened palms and averted their eyes.

A woman with a mint-green cloak shooed a young boy into a nearby house. Evony had seen them twice before. A gangling man in a floppy hat disappeared around the far side of the cobbler's shop. Every time she'd visited in the past four months, he'd been lingering somewhere near the market square. And over near the well with a bundle of plaiting under her arm stood a young woman with a friendly face and suspicious eyes. She'd offered water on her last visit, but Evony had been too afraid to accept. Now was not the time for making acquaintances.

This time, Evony was the one who looked away and continued walking.

Sloshing her way from one shop to another, she filled her basket with items she couldn't get at home. Ground corn and new boot laces. Beans and a pair of blue mittens. She eyed a sack of potatoes, but her basket already grew heavy. Much too heavy for an old woman.

As she neared the apothecary, her last stop, a cloaked man bumped into her as he walked backward from behind the building. The basket slipped from her hands and landed heavily on her

foot. She hissed, baring her teeth at him.

"Pardon me, ma'am, I was wondering ..." His voiced trailed off when he saw her, but his expression was unreadable underneath the deep hood. He backed up a step and then reached out as if to retrieve the basket.

She snatched it up, her eyes widening at his show of kindness. Didn't he know who she was?

Witch! Quick, get inside, it's the witch!

She flinched at the voices in her head, the words as shocking as when they'd first been spoken ... and yet somehow satisfying in serving her purpose. Surely he knew who she was.

What the villagers said she was.

She blinked at him, but he stood as if awaiting an answer to an unasked question, his arm still outstretched, fingers red with cold.

"Mind your own business, if you know what's good for you," she whispered hoarsely. The spell never changed her voice, and so she disguised it as best she could.

His arm dropped, but he didn't flee. He adjusted the worn pack on his back, shifting uncertainly in clothes as muddy as hers. He was a traveler, then. A stranger. That could prove even more dangerous than someone who knew the stories.

"Mind your business," she said again, and then stepped around him. He would soon forget about the rude old woman in tattered clothes, or, better yet, he would hear the rumors and move along.

Evony kicked mud from her boots outside the apothecary's shop. The ragged hem of her wool skirt had fared as badly after the early autumn downpour, but she could do nothing for it. As she reached for the handle, the door flew open and two young women rushed out, looking askance at her as they stepped into the muddy street. No greetings or comments about the sudden turn of the weather passed their lips.

Good. At least some people still remembered to be wary. She tried to ignore the lump in her throat as she heard the two friends chatter secretively as they fled.

No time for making acquaintances.

Grasping the door handle, Evony narrowed her eyes and forced herself to glare over her shoulder at the women as they scurried down the street arm in arm, glancing back at her several times as if to assure themselves she wasn't following.

After her encounter with the stranger, who was still visible from the corner of her eye where he lingered near the butcher's window, she needed to ensure people kept their distance. From her. From the forest. From her home.

She stepped inside the shop and paused to let her eyes adjust to the flickering candlelight. The apothecary stood frozen behind his worktable, his large ears and beady eyes making him look like a rabbit seconds before it bolted from a fox. Evony scratched behind her own ear with a long, jagged fingernail, her scalp itching from the wiry grey curls mashed against her head under the cloak. She flicked the hood onto her shoulders, dislodging a few snowy flakes in the process. The motion seemed to snap the apothecary out of his trance.

"Good morning, Madam Helga." His voice squeaked and cut off, as if her name had caught in his throat.

She often had the same reaction to the false name her mother had chosen, but she embraced it for the duration of her stay. In the village, she was Helga and no one else.

He cleared his throat. "How may I help you this fine ... day." His gaze flicked to the glowering clouds outside the window.

Evony approached in three quick strides and thumped her large basket onto the counter. The apothecary jumped back, knocking over a mortar and pestle with his elbow.

In a hoarse whisper, she rattled off half a dozen items, ending with, "... lavender salve, licorice and cropleek tincture, and extract of spotted corobane."

She always ended the list with a poison. For the rats, of course.

The apothecary's eyes widened, but he turned and began filling her order with shaky hands.

Evony tapped a long nail idly on the counter top as she mentally checked off these last items from her list. She wouldn't be returning to the village for weeks. If all went well, she might not return at all. At least, not as the witch.

If all went well.

She resisted the urge to bite one of the grimy nails.

"Your order, ma'am."

Startled out of her musings, Evony hid her jolt of surprise behind a frown and a snarl of annoyance.

The apothecary gulped and then nudged the various glass vials and small ceramic pots closer to her.

She placed each item carefully into the basket, cushioning them among the bags of beans and bundles of salt and spices. After securing the lid tightly, she dropped the required coins into the man's quivering palm.

Remembering his manners almost too late, he bid her a hasty "good day" as the door closed behind her.

The cloaked stranger waited outside, his hood thrown back. As soon as he saw her, he rushed over, looking as if he might take the basket right out of her hands. "Pardon me, ma'am. I'm just passing through on my way to Eastland, and I'm looking for work to get some supplies. I've asked around town, but everyone seems jumpy today. Is there anything you need help with? Anything at all?"

In the four months she'd been visiting the village, those were the most words anyone had ever spoken to her at one time. She set the basket on a damp patch of grass—it *was* heavy—stepped forward to keep him from snatching it, and then took a good look at him. Her disguise made her bold, and she studied him from head to toe in a way she wouldn't have dared had she been herself.

His drab cloak was tattered and travel-stained, and his pack hung loose on his back. Unkempt hair the dark brown of molasses stuck up at odd angles, as if permanently windblown. He was taller than she by at least a foot and broad shouldered, although his clothes hung on him as if he had missed a fortnight of suppers. They were tradesman's clothes, and they could do with a wash.

He stared right back at her with a questioning look in his molasses brown eyes, as if not quite believing what he saw.

She found it disconcerting and picked up her basket, determined to move on. "If you know what's good for you, you'll—"

"Please?" As if anticipating her words, he held out an imploring hand. "Please, I'll carry your basket for you. Chop wood. Anything."

Her gut twisted at the desperation in his voice. She couldn't leave him standing there starving and penniless. It's what her mother would have done.

But she wasn't her mother, despite what the villagers thought.

Besides, what harm was there in helping him? He was a stranger. Helping him along as quickly as possible would be in her best interest as well as his.

She pushed the basket into his hands. “Follow me.” She strode back into the market square, his footsteps sploshing in the mud behind her. After she bought a large sack of potatoes, he took those from the vendor without a word.

Impulsively, Evony entered the tailor’s shop while the man waited outside. She bought a pair of sheepskin mittens a few sizes too large for her small hands, while the shopkeeper glanced repeatedly out the window. She wasn’t doing the stranger any favors. If anything, her attention would make the villagers even more suspicious of him. Good thing he was only passing through.

She tucked the mittens into her frayed rope belt and walked back outside into a light mist. She would have to leave the man behind before entering the forest, so she might as well make use of his assistance while she could. She added a large wheel of cheese to the bulging basket. The gratefulness in his eyes at having honest work was almost too much to bear, and she pushed down a twinge of guilt as he staggered under the added weight. He would need to feed himself soon.

With her purse lighter than anticipated, Evony threaded her way around mud puddles as she headed towards the woods, avoiding the sideways glances of the few villagers still venturing out in the damp. Most gave her and the stranger a wide berth.

The man shifted the heavy basket on his arm as he strode to keep up with her, unbalancing himself for a moment. Evony instinctively veered out of his way and ended up ramming her hip against an overflowing rain barrel near the pieman’s shop.

The shop curtains fluttered as the pieman ducked out of sight. The most she’d ever seen of him since visiting the village was his nose pressed against the window.

She rubbed the bruise already forming.

“Are you all right, ma’am?” the stranger said.

“Mind your business,” she snapped in her hoarse whisper. The kindness in his voice unnerved her. What she wouldn’t give to have someone speak that way to the girl inside the disguise.

After slogging through streets and alleys at a steady pace, Evony neared an empty hovel well beyond the respectable houses in the middle of town. She was nearing her destination. Her first one, at least.

“You live here?” the man asked.

“No.” She pulled her hood back over her head and heaved a sigh of relief that this visit was almost over.

They finally reached her soggy donkey, and the animal perked up as if he were just as eager to be rid of the place. When the man had finished securing the basket and other items to her liking, she held out the sheepskin mittens and two silver coins.

His eyebrows rose, and he held his hands up in refusal of the payment. “I’ve not worked half enough to earn all that.”

“I’ll set the wages for your work,” she said. “You’ll take these and one more thing.”

“What more could you give me?”

“Advice.” She pressed the mittens and coins into his reluctant hands. “Get what you need and leave this place as soon as possible.”

“That’s it?” His hands stroked the sheepskin as he spoke, but his gaze stayed on her. “I was planning to do that anyway.”

“See that your plans don’t change.” She needed him to leave. The more he spoke, the harder it was becoming for her to turn away.

He nodded, confusion in his eyes. “I can’t thank you enough. I—”

“Go,” she said forcefully. “Don’t waste any more of my time.” She grasped the donkey’s lead rope and moved away, refusing to look into the stranger’s molasses brown eyes any longer.

Clink. The coins went into a pocket. *Shush.* The mittens slid onto his hands. *Squelch. Squelch. Squelch.* His footsteps receded towards the village square.

Evony blinked back a sudden feeling of loneliness. It would be a slow trip home, but she welcomed the time it would give her to ponder the dilemma that faced her once she arrived. She’d been putting it off for too long, and she had let the stranger distract her from what had to be done.

Whether she succeeded or failed, home would never be the same again.

Chapter Two

"Geranium, gladiolus, goldenrod ... ." Evony chewed a nail as she swept her lantern over the flowers in the garden, illuminating pinks and golds and lavenders in the small circle of light. What should she try this time? The first three attempts had all been failures, but she'd not yet used a flower. Perhaps one of them would be the secret ingredient she was searching for.

She sighed. Most girls her age would be picking bouquets for their hair or receiving them from their sweethearts, and here she was trying to choose a flower for a potion she had no interest in brewing. And yet, it was vital that she do so.

"You'd better use the glads first." A brownie with a thatch of bushy almond-blond hair ran into view. Barely five inches tall, he jumped up and smacked the orange-red flowers of a gladiolus. "They're almost out of season."

"Cork is right," added a second brownie. He leaped up behind her, caught the end of her braid, and then climbed up it like a rope, bracing his feet against her back. He settled on her shoulder, feet dangling in front. "And these match your hair."

"Matching my hair is the least of my concerns," Evony said, but she picked a few of the flowers.

Broom's hair was just as bushy as his friend's, although darker, like a roasted chestnut. Both brownies wore matching knee-length trousers and short tunics of grey-green sycamore bark. They'd never explained to her how they had managed to fashion supple clothing from such rigid materials, despite all her wheedling for information.

Evony tucked three of the orange flowers among the eggs in the basket at her feet.

Cork danced a jig around one of the trimmed plants and thumbed his nose at Broom. "Ha! She used *my* idea!"

Broom jumped onto the ground, rolling several times before regaining his feet. "It wasn't *your* idea. She was thinking of using those, anyway."

"My idea! My idea!" Cork's frolicking led him straight into a dew-covered spiderweb in between the geraniums. "Blech! Ack!"

Broom rolled his eyes and walked away from the lantern light. "Tell me when it's over." He held his breath and blinked out of sight.

"Get it off! Get it off!" Cork thrashed on the ground trying to free himself of the sticky threads and covering himself with dirt and twigs in the process. As soon as he popped back up, he ran into the webs again. "It's in my mouth!"

Evony set down the lantern and plucked off the offending webs. "Broom, get back here and help your friend. I have work to do." She threw a handful of soil to her left and watched it fall back to the ground ... except for a small area, where it landed and formed a Broom-shaped silhouette.

Broom reappeared, gasping for air. "How ... how did you know I was there?"

"You ate a whole clove of garlic last night." She helped him brush dirt off his shoulders and swiped the last web from Cork's hair. "Now, would you two please go and put on a pot of water to boil? I'll have cookies for you later."

"Haha! C'mon, stinker!" Cork ruffled Broom's hair and took off at a run. Broom quickly caught up, and they continued on, each trying to shoulder the other out of the way.

She smiled at their antics, added some fresh rosemary to her basket, and then secured the garden gate behind her. One of the goats greeted her on the other side with a nudge to the hip.

"Ouch. That's my bad side." It had been a week since her trip to the village, and the bruise still lingered, as did her memory of a kind stranger and a pair of molasses brown eyes. "Here." She handed the nanny a sprig of rosemary and shooed her away, trying to brush aside her sentimental thoughts as well, but they clung like Cork's spiderwebs. The man would be long gone by now, and she had more pressing matters to attend to.

She stepped onto a white pebble path that led from the garden through a lemon grove and then on to the cottage. Several ripe fruits peeked out from among the dark leaves—tiny suns leading her home. There were finally enough for a pie. Or, with the evenings turning crisp, hot tea with lemon and honey. She blew out her lantern, and the smooth stones seemed to glow like bits of leftover moonlight.

Evony drew in a deep breath as she reached the end of the grove. She stopped behind the woodshed, preparing herself for the sight of her home in the sunrise. Any moment now, the first rays would crest the green canopy of the forest and spill over onto the cottage.

The magical moment.

She took another deep breath and held it. *Ginger, cloves, nutmeg, cinnamon.* Those scents rarely changed. *Chocolate? And ... raspberry? No. Strawberry.*

Exhaling slowly, she stepped around the corner with the sunlight, eyes closed. At the end of her breath, she looked first at the pebble path at her feet and slowly followed it with her eyes as it curved towards the front door. As she took in the sight of her home, her eyes widened, and her heartbeat quickened, just as it had every morning since she'd been a girl of five.

Her lips curled into a smile, despite the impossible task that lay ahead.

At the end of the path stood a one-story cottage with wisps of smoke curling from a chimney built of chocolate bricks. Slabs of gingerbread formed four walls holding up a roof slathered with waves of strawberry frosting. Almond-laden plum cakes studded the eaves. More chocolate bricks formed the door, while white frosting framed blue candy-glass windows thrown open to the cool autumn morning. Dotted along the smooth gingerbread, custard cream cookies, golden butterscotch candies, and gooey honey cakes formed swirling patterns up and down and around the sides of the cottage.

The sweets never fell off. The frosting never melted. Nothing ever rotted. Every morning brought new confections, a never-ending daydream of sugar and spice. Everything nice a girl of five could imagine.

Evony sighed, and the moment passed. She was no longer that girl, and month after month, the wonder slipped away a little faster each time.

If only it were as easy to undo the real magic.

A magpie cawed from a nearby lemon tree, careful to keep his distance from the cottage. This particular bird had a taste for gingerbread and had even defied her mother's warding spell once. Evony had been obliged to set his cookie form safely inside on a platter for an hour until the effects wore off. She blamed herself for tossing gingersnap crumbs his way, but no harm was done in the end. The only other animal to show interest in the sweets was a dainty fox with a mulberry-red coat. He showed up several times a month and paced at the edge of the woods until Evony laid out a few of her own sweets for him. Once he'd enjoyed his treat, he disappeared again with not even a sniff in the direction of the chickens. All other creatures heeded the ward and stayed clear, from the smallest beetle to the hungriest bear. Even the goats didn't come near.

Any human or creature capable of spreading tales had the opposite problem. Even now, Evony found herself drawn to the confections, and she was kept safe only because of her memory of what

happened when people gave in to temptation. Unlike with the magpie, the effects were permanent.

But if all went well, that would soon change.

Evony's boots crunched on the pebbles as she approached the door. Using her apron as a glove to protect her hand from the sugary doorknob, she entered the cottage.

No sweets met her eyes once she passed the threshold, unless they were made by her hands. Candy colors gave way to earth tones, dominated by the grey stones lining the one-room cottage. An iron stove took up a third of the wall to her right, the main tool of her trade, acquired by her mother long before her birth. A fire crackled in the middle compartment, warming the oven below while heating the stove top above.

Cork and Broom sat on the long wooden counter nearby, legs dangling and eating a coffee bean apiece. Broom's eyes widened when he saw her, and he tried to hide the bean behind his back.

"She's already seen us," Cork said with his mouth full. "You might as well own up to it."

Evony set the basket on the table and pumped some water in the sink to wash her hands. "You know those are off limits, and not just because they're expensive. The last thing the two of you need is more energy. How many have you eaten?"

Cork swallowed. "Just the two."

"Two each, you mean." Broom gave his friend a told-you-so look and finished his bean without looking at Evony.

She grinned and shooed them off the counter. Most people who were lucky enough to have helpful household brownies left out a pan of cream or a dish of porridge for them. Then again, most people rarely saw their brownies. These two never seemed to stop eating, and they not only showed themselves on a daily basis, but also had proven to be quite helpful over the months they'd been with her after her mother's death.

And, she had to admit, every baker liked to have their goods appreciated.

She threw a few handfuls of oats into the pot of boiling water and set aside the teakettle they'd been kind enough to heat as well, although they hadn't done it for her benefit alone. They'd come to appreciate a thimbleful of tea with their sweets as much as anyone.

While the brownies stirred the oatmeal and readied the tea, Evony mixed a small batch of gingerbread dough and frosting with practiced moves. She could do it in her sleep ... or, thankfully, in the middle of an argument between brownies.

"It's my turn!" Cork gestured with the stirring spoon and slopped oatmeal on Broom's tunic.

Broom snatched the spoon and continued stirring breakfast. "You did it yesterday. Ask Evony." He flicked the oatmeal from his tunic onto Cork's toes.

Hopping on one foot, Cork made his way to the sink and sat on the edge. He looked imploringly at Evony while he cleaned up. "You'll let me be the gingerbread pattern today, won't you?"

She rolled the dough into a ball and covered it with a cloth. After placing it on a tray next to the bowl of frosting, she shook her head and said, "It's Broom's turn."

"But—"

She raised an eyebrow and nodded towards the dough on the tray. "If you want your share, behave yourself and go wake Juniper."

He crossed his arms and pouted, but his sulk didn't last long. As Evony lifted the cellar door beside the table, he ran towards the loft bed situated opposite the front entry. "Juniper! Juni! Wake up, you lazy dragon!" He jumped from the counter to the bed and then climbed the corner post to the top bunk.

"Watch the glass vials!" Broom called.

Cork was nowhere near the worktable at the foot of the bunk beds, but Evony appreciated Broom's reminder to be careful of the numerous bottles and tiny ceramic pots. She really should have kept her mother's irreplaceable potions and supplies in the cellar, but she couldn't bring herself to work down there. She preferred the fresh air and sunlight flowing through the open windows to the dark, musty hole in the ground.

She descended a short staircase, almost steep enough to be called a ladder, and placed the tray on a barrel to keep the dough cool before baking. Turning to the opposite wall, she surveyed a shelf lined with seven identical clay jars—one of her mother's prized collections. She ran her fingers along the labels: *flour, oats, oil, fruits, sugars, butter, chocolate.* A limitless supply of all the basics needed for a baker's pantry. Cupping her hand around the dried fruits jar, she said, "Cranberries." She reached in and scooped out a handful and then replaced the lid. Although they worked differently than the spoon wand, the jars were all fairy-spelled items as well, and her mother had flatly refused to tell her how she came about owning them.

Heading back to the kitchen, Evony shut the cellar door behind her and then ladled oatmeal into four bowls—two regular wooden bowls, and two polished walnut-shell bowls.

Cork leaped onto the top bunk and was met by a loud yawn, followed by a grunt of annoyance. "Wake up, Juni!" Cork jumped up and down on the pillow that cradled Juniper's basket bed filled with potpourri.

Juniper roared. It came out every bit as ferocious as a full-sized dragon roar, but because his size was that of a squirrel, it always sounded somewhat ... diminished. Cork, at least, was hardly intimidated.

"It's *Juniper*, you annoying brownie! Now stop jumping on my bed!" Juniper crawled out from his basket of dried flowers and leaves and stretched his wings with another yawn. "You don't see me causing earthquakes when you're sleeping," he muttered.

"You hear that, Broom?" Cork turned his back to Juniper and put his hands on his hips. "I'm a quaker of the earth. Like a *giant.* What do you think of that?"

Broom rolled his eyes and sat down on the table to enjoy his share of breakfast. "Don't let it go to your head."

Juniper shot a cloud of cinnamon "flames" at Cork and then glided down to Evony's shoulder and nuzzled her braid.

"Hey!" Cork coughed and brushed cinnamon dust from his cheeks as he made his way over to join them. "You can't go spewing spices for no reason!"

Juniper tiptoed down Evony's arm to the table. He stood with wings outstretched, facing Cork where he jogged along the counter. "Dragons can spew *fire* whenever they're angry enough to do so. My fire just happens to be cinnamon while I'm in this form. No harm done."

Cork stopped and looked taken aback. "But ... what about the dragon tri-code?"

Juniper closed his eyes and recited the code. "Peace first. Work hard. Self control." He folded his wings with a sigh and nodded to Cork. "My apologies."

Cork hopped onto the table and bowed with a flourish. "Apology accepted. And I ... well, I didn't mean to make you angry."

With another sigh, Juniper took his place in front of his bowl. "It's not you. I'm *always* angry. You might be, too, if you were a *COOKIE*."

Evony patted his head and stroked his back, noting as she always did the perfectly-baked-cookie texture of his skin. Like the cottage itself, Juniper was made of gingerbread. Unlike the cottage, he hadn't always been that way. In fact, it was thanks to the cottage that he'd been transformed from his

magnificent green dragon form into an angry little cookie. She'd had barely a glimpse of him when he'd landed on the white pebble path six years ago, exhausted and hungry. There hadn't been enough time to warn him.

No matter how the sugar sparkles, never eat the sweets. Her mother's reminder had helped ensure Evony's safety over the years—as had the ample supply of homemade pies and cakes.

Evony handed each of the brownies a few dried cranberries and stirred some of the fruit and cream into Juniper's porridge. "I'll have you back to normal soon, see if I don't."

The dragon nodded absently, focusing on his food. "What ingredient have you chosen today for the potion?"

He was trying to mask it, but she could see the hope hiding deep within his eyes. She waved towards the orange petals peeking over the top of the basket at the far end of the table. "Gladiolus."

"Flowers? That's a long shot."

"Everything is a long shot," Broom said.

She gave the brownie a warning look and then changed the subject to save Juniper from struggling to put on a brave face. "You slept late today. Were you out chasing fireflies again?"

He grinned mischievously, and his brown eyes twinkled. "Indeed, and I caught one this time, thank you very much."

"You caught one?" Cork lifted his face from the bottom of his bowl he'd been licking. Admiration shone in his eyes. He flicked an oat flake from his nose.

Juniper rolled his shoulders in a dragon shrug. "It didn't taste as good as I thought it would." He popped a cranberry into his mouth.

Broom chuckled.

"It's time for you lot to clean up while I make cookies." Evony carried the dishes to the sink and then fetched the cooled dough from the cellar. Broom paced while she dusted the table with flour, waiting for his turn to be the cutout.

"We have two of the cookie people so far, correct?" he said.

She nodded and plopped the dough into the center of the floured surface.

"That leaves five still in the hands of that fiend." His lip curled and he looked sick to his stomach.

"We'll have three after tonight," she reminded him. The dough grew thinner and thinner as she rolled the wooden pin back and forth. "Ready?"

Broom stepped lightly onto the damp gingerbread dough, careful to leave no footprints. He lay down near one edge and extended his arms and legs just enough for Evony to cut a gingerbread form around him using a sharp, flattened stick.

Her mother had never used cookie cutters. *Every person is unique, and so every gingerbread person should be unique.* The shocking truth of her words had played out nine times over the years, as starving or curious wanderers had stumbled too near their secluded home. Evony was determined that it would never happen again.

"Don't hold your breath, please," she told Broom. "I can't see you."

"Sorry." He reappeared, breathing deeply but with his eyes closed.

"Losing your nerve?" Cork said, drying a bowl. "I can step in anytime."

"Oh, go jump in the suds." He didn't open his eyes, but he muttered, "Just because I take my job seriously ..."

Evony finished the first cutout, and Broom moved to another spot.

"We've had no visitors in a year." Juniper flew the last clean bowl up to its shelf, careful to stay clear of the dish water. Even magical gingerbread didn't hold up well when wet, as he'd learned after

a frightening tumble into the watering trough soon after his transformation. “If you don’t find the missing ingredient soon, that ... *fiend* will be upset that there are no more gingerbread people to test on.”

“Maybe so,” she said, “but at least that means we’ll have all the gingerbread people *out* of his possession and *in* ours.” She finished the second cutout and nudged Broom over.

Finished with the washing up, Cork threw almonds for Juniper to catch midair.

The third and fourth cutouts took a little extra time, as she added a tiny skirt to each of them. Two gingerbread girls and two gingerbread boys. “All done.”

Broom stood up and brushed flour off his sycamore trousers. An almond thwacked him on the side of the head. “Oi!” He hopped off the table and chased Cork once around the kitchen and then out a window.

“Will they come back?” Juniper scraped the remaining gingerbread dough into a lump for the goats. He still asked the question from time to time out of habit, but the brownies had never failed to return since they’d first shown up.

“They always do.” Evony put the cookies into the oven. “They’ll never be as much mine as you are, but I can’t imagine not having them around.”

He grinned. “And here I thought you were mine.”

She sat down and leaned her arms on the table, hands clasping elbows. Juniper climbed onto her wrist and gazed up at her.

She brought her head level with his. “It’s hard to believe it’s been six years.”

He wrapped his tail tightly around her arm. “You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

“Too bad it had to come along with the worst thing that’s ever happened to you,” she said.

Shaking his head, he hugged her wrist. “Believe it or not, there are worse things than being a cookie. Not many, but ....” He shrugged. “I never thought I’d find a companion.”

She chuckled. “You couldn’t have been searching for long. You were my age then. Young for a dragon.”

“Eighteen was old enough to be out on my own.” He grinned. “You know ... the village girls your age will be thinking of marriage soon, if they’re not already.”

An image of molasses brown eyes flashed into her mind. She shook it off and sat up straight, already regretting telling him about the stranger. This was no time for distractions. “Yes, well, I’ve barely begun to think of what I’ll do once I’ve completed this task. *If* I complete it.”

“You will,” he said confidently. “And you’re going to want more than a dragon to keep you company. I’ll help you pick a good man. I’ve seen more of the world than you, after all.”

She played along, reluctant to admit how right he was. “I’ll be sure to consult you when suitors start lining up at my door.”

They shared a laugh, and then she removed the cookies from the oven. Four perfectly golden-brown gingerbread.

Juniper inspected them closely. “If I wasn’t a cookie myself, I’d take care of that fiend for you. I’m sure I could think of something to do that wouldn’t violate the tri-code.”

“I’m sure you could, but you know as well as I do that it’s not just the tri-code that’s holding us back.” Evony rubbed his cheek with a knuckle. “Fetch the raisins for me while I get the frosting.”

He did as requested and had eight raisins lined up on the table when she returned from the cellar with the frosting. The cookies cooled quickly this time of year, even in the warm kitchen. She decorated them each with a simple outline along the edges, three buttons down the front, and a straight line for the mouth. Never a smile. The raisin eyes went on last with another dab of frosting.

“They look good enough to eat,” Juniper said. “But not yet.”
She rolled up her sleeves. “Time for the real work now.”

Chapter Three

After storing the four gingerbread cookies safely in the cellar, Evony walked to the worktable nestled along the wall at the foot of the bunk beds. Two wooden planks served as shelves above it, and every inch of surface was covered with shimmering glass bottles filled with liquids in pale pinks, vibrant yellows, sickly greens, and every color in between. Tiny ceramic pots and jars filled in the spaces between bottles. Bundles of dried roses hung from the ceiling, their scent tickling her nose.

She glanced at Juniper. “Could you fetch me a packet of tansy roots from the cellar?”

Juniper dove into a hole between floorboards near the stove, just big enough for him to wiggle through with his wings tucked.

She reached underneath the worktable and retrieved an apple-sized cauldron made entirely of gold. After placing it on an iron stand over a fat candle, she reached inside and pulled out two coins. Fairy magic could be useful.

A witch’s magic was another matter entirely.

Juniper reappeared with the requested packet. He landed on the loft bed and dropped it into Evony’s outstretched palm. “What did we get today?”

“Two coppers.” She handed them over, and he stashed them in a low cupboard at the end of the kitchen counter. The cauldron had not only allowed her mother to buy needed supplies over the years, but it was also vital to the potion Evony was about to undertake.

Consulting her mother’s notebook, Evony lit the candle and began preparing the ingredients, meticulously weighing and measuring each one. Any mistakes, and the results would be useless.

Juniper climbed back out of the cellar after a second trip to check supplies. “We’re almost out of nettles.” He insisted on doing a daily inventory.

“I’ve got enough of those for what I need. It’s my mother’s potions that I’m worried about. I’ve only got enough for six more trials, if I want to save some for when I get this right.”

“You have her book. Can’t you make more of those potions?”

“Unfortunately, I can’t read any of the others.” Evony fetched the gladiolus petals and ground up a handful with the pestle. She measured them and added the exact amount to the cauldron. The final ingredient. “She never had time to translate this one to her shorthand. And even if I could read them, I’m not a ...”

She always had trouble saying it out loud.

“I’m not a witch.” She removed the cauldron from the stand and lidded it with a tight-fitting piece of cork. “The only reason I have any hope at all of getting this right is because I know how to follow a recipe.”

Juniper flew down to her shoulder and patted her cheek. “You’re doing the best you can. We just have to find that missing ingredient. Who knows? Maybe this one is it.”

Once the potion was safely stored in the cellar to cure for eight hours in the cauldron, she took Juniper outside and they spent half the morning gardening. The other half was spent experimenting with the gingerbread house.

Evony stood once more in front of the worktable, a large bowl full of gingerbread chunks and globs of pink frosting before her. Juniper perched on her shoulder, glaring at it.

“Burning never works,” she said. They tried it every time, nevertheless, and had gotten the same result with this batch. Cloying smoke and a few sparks, but not even a char on the sweets. It would take some sort of magical fire beyond Evony’s knowledge to get the stuff to ignite.

Juniper’s wings twitched. “If only I had my dragon fire.” That might be magical enough, but it was also not an option until he returned to his true form.

“Water does nothing, either,” she said. This time they’d tried boiling the sweets in vinegar, but the magical confections had floated defiantly in the liquid and left them gulping fresh air at the windows.

“You’ve tried all your mother’s potions you can spare.”

“And some I can’t.”

He blew a forceful stream of cinnamon at the offending treats. When nothing happened, he snorted.

Evony sneezed and waved away the cloud of spice. Despite the clear evidence that she’d inherited no shred of magical ability from her mother, she felt obliged to find some way to destroy the home that had both delighted and horrified her over the years. If ... no, when ... she finally achieved her goal and moved on, she couldn’t leave it behind to create more problems.

Juniper glanced at her apron pocket. “We could try the wand again.”

“That always results in marshmallow.”

“What if we buried the sweets?” he offered.

They hadn’t tried that. She grabbed her spade and took the bowl outside. “Where?”

He flew to a spot between two trees at the edge of the clearing. “This looks far enough away from the cottage. Maybe three feet down?”

She dug and he supervised. His gingerbread hide was too delicate to risk abrasions from rocks and roots. Once the hole was deep enough, she upended the contents of the bowl, added a handful of custard cream cookies fresh from the cottage, and then covered it all over with dirt. “Now what?”

“We check back in a couple of days.”

She nodded. Obviously, he had no more clue of what they might find than she did. She tried not to think about the enormity of the job if it worked and they had to bury the whole house.

After lunch, she baked fig rolls and apple pie and honey cakes with rosemary, filling the cottage with soothing childhood scents. She also baked fresh gingersnaps to cover any lingering smell of the gingerbread. Not only were they the fiend’s favorite treats, but their scent would hopefully keep him from discovering what they were really doing.

Late in the evening, Cork and Broom returned, hopeful but subdued, ready to do their part during the fiend’s visit. After a quick bite of stew, they all got to work.

Evony retrieved the golden cauldron and set it on the counter. Juniper and the brownies crowded around as she lifted the lid.

As if to prove her earlier words true, the potion had turned a soft lilac color. She groaned and wrung her braid in her hands. “It’s supposed to be purple. Dark purple.” What was she missing?

“You’d better change,” Juniper told her softly, taking his place under a flat, rectangular basket on the counter. Resigned, Evony slid the four gingerbread cookies in beside him and then laid a bouquet of orange gladiolus blooms on top—enough to draw attention from the basket itself but not too heavy for him to lift. The cauldron sat ready nearby.

Cork and Broom ran to the cupboard at the end of the counter and hopped the two inches needed to get to the bottom shelf.

“Ooh, coppers!” Cork’s muffled voice filtered through the crack they left in the door to keep an eye on things. Broom hushed him.

Evony pulled her mother's wooden spoon wand from her apron pocket. After her mother had died, it had been one of the first things Evony had tried to use to make things right, but she'd only ended up temporarily changing the cottage's outer frosting into marshmallow and later turning Cork's skin blue for a week when he got caught in a stray blast. She had no power or knowledge to control a fairy-made wand, and she couldn't risk destroying the whole house and its vital contents yet. Not until she discovered the potion and made what she needed. There were seven unfortunate gingerbread people who needed her to make them human again, not to mention Juniper.

Evony's mother had taught her only one use for the spoon wand, and that's what she would use it for now. Playing dress up.

"Hurry up!" Juniper hissed.

She raised the wand and twirled it over her head in a mixing motion. "Princess," she whispered.

Just as when she'd stood outside the village, golden sparkles swirled overhead and then settled on her from head to toe. The golden dust disappeared with a thousand tiny flashes of yellow light, leaving her standing in her new costume. One of the brownies whistled softly in appreciation of the disguise.

Evony tucked the spoon wand into her bodice. This time, the magic had created a plum gown with a split skirt layered over a billowing white underdress. Striped candies, sugarplums, and candied oranges adorned her shoulders and bodice and trailed down the skirt. Purple slippers topped with peppermints peeked out from beneath the hem. Her hair hung in loose waves down her back.

Whether it was her mother's intention or the spoon simply taking inspiration from its surroundings, the wand always created princess gowns that resembled sweets. The fiend would be pleased. He found the smell of candied oranges soothing.

She paced around the table, chewing a nail. The evening sun shone through the windows, bathing the room in shades of peach, and the citrus breeze from the lemon grove mingled with the scents of cinnamon and sugar in the kitchen. The sound of jaunty whistling reached her ears a few moments before he arrived. She tensed in anticipation.

Bang!

The door flew open and cracked against the grey stones. A man-shaped form ducked under the door frame and entered the room. In most ways, he looked like a real man, but in the lantern light, his gingerbread skin had a sugary sparkle. Frosting-white hair curled over his temples in thick, wavy lines and fell against his collar as if needing a trim, but in the ten months since his creation, it had never grown an inch. He set a basket on the table, and then raised white-frosted eyebrows in question as he stared at her.

The fiend. Her mother's creation. The gingerbread man.

Her mouth suddenly dry, Evony clasped her hands in front of her, raised her chin, and looked into eyes the color of smashed blackberries. "Still not knocking before we enter?"

"Why should I knock like a servant or a guest?" he said, his voice slow and rich. He looked her over, a smile playing at the corner of his mouth. "Is that any way to greet your king?" He stood tall, his head almost brushing the roof beams, and smoothed his mint green tunic. The velvet shirt underneath almost perfectly matched the strawberry frosting on the cottage roof. Dark green trousers and brown knee boots finished his "kingly" look.

He'd always been fond of nice clothes, but they never looked quite right on him. It was like frosting a cookie with lace and ribbons. Not for the first time, she wondered if he had a spoon wand of his own for playing dress up.

"You're not my king," she managed to say.

“You will call me Magnus.”

She pressed her lips together.

“Your mother gave me a name before she died, and you will use it.”

She’d managed not to use it in the four months since losing her mother. Why was he insisting now? No matter what she called him, he would still be the fiend. A cookie. A monster.

“Say it.” He stepped closer. “I want to hear my name from the lips of my queen.”

“I am *not* your queen.”

“Not yet.” He waited, his fists clenching and unclenching at his sides.

She cringed inwardly. Calling him by name would humanize him in a way she was entirely uncomfortable with, but she didn’t want to anger him. Well, not too much. He still had what she needed.

“Welcome ... Magnus.” She couldn’t bring herself to say more.

His grin broadened, and he approached her where she stood with her back to the counter. He stopped with one foot of space between them and looked her over as he always did, squinting as he tried to make out the details of her gown and the expression on her face. He ran a finger over one of the candied oranges on her shoulder, a pleased glint in his eye. His skin radiated heat like a cookie taken fresh from the oven, and he smelled like one, too ... except burnt and with too much spice.

He always stopped short of touching her skin, as if it was too much of a reminder that he was not yet flesh and blood.

“You look beautiful tonight,” he said. “My gingerbread queen.”

She gritted her teeth and swallowed a lump in her throat. She would never call him her king.

He surveyed the cottage, although he wouldn’t be able to make out much of his surroundings with his weak eyesight. His sense of smell, however, was excellent, and he always made a game of guessing what she’d baked that day. She’d already placed the items in a second basket for him to take home.

He breathed deeply and watched for her reaction. “Apple pie.”

She nodded.

“Something with figs.”

She nodded again.

“Honey cakes? And ... gingersnaps.” A wicked look entered his eyes and his lip curled. “You always make my favorite. There’s something else, though.”

Her heart beat in her throat. He couldn’t have guessed their ruse, not yet.

“Something you’ve not used before.”

“Rosemary,” she said quickly. “In the honey cakes.”

He turned towards the table. “I look forward to sampling them.”

As soon as his back was to her, she allowed herself to wilt against the counter for a split second before standing tall again.

The fiend ... Magnus ... handed her a small wooden box from his otherwise empty basket. Evony took the box and placed it reverently on the counter. Inside, nestled in straw, lay a single gingerbread girl. Or woman. Evony wouldn’t know until she found a potion that worked.

“A girl,” she whispered, as if to herself. Juniper would need to know which cookie to switch with the girl when the time came. She removed the girl from the box, placed her gently on the counter beside Juniper’s basket, and slid the golden cauldron over.

Magnus snatched the box and tucked it under his arm. “Get on with it.”

She flinched. “Please ... Magnus, please don’t eat the ... cookie ... if this doesn’t work. I’ve baked you enough sweets. You don’t need one little cookie. If you keep eating them, we’ll soon have no more to run trials on.”

He looked at her with genuine sadness in his eyes. “A king must do what he deems best, even if his queen objects. Unfortunately, nothing else seems to have motivated you to work so tirelessly to find what your mother meant for me to have.” He slammed his fist on the counter much too close to the gingerbread girl. “Find this for me, Evony. Find this for *us*. I grow impatient to bring you to my castle and begin our life together as *man* and wife.”

She tried to hide the shiver of revulsion that rippled up her spine. His castle was no more than a well-furnished cave in the wooded hillside a mile away. Had her mother created these delusions when she’d created the gingerbread man? Or had he taken to heart the tales from the storybooks Evony had used to teach him to read?

“Get on with it. Now.”

Evony measured out one third of the potion and poured it onto the gingerbread girl. As soon as the first drops hit, white smoke billowed from the cookie. Before she could count to three, the entire cottage was filled with a sickly-sweet cloud. She covered her nose, straining to hear any sign that Juniper had slid out his gingerbread cookie from underneath the basket, or that Cork and Broom had saved Magnus’s gingerbread girl from her fate.

She heard nothing, which meant Magnus heard nothing.

It took one long minute for the room to clear enough to see the counter again. The gingerbread girl became visible, if barely, her mouth a straight, emotionless line amid the smoke. Anger passed over Magnus’s face. He grabbed the cookie and bit off its head.

Chapter Four

Evony gasped as Magnus ate the entire gingerbread cookie in front of her, unsure in the lingering cloud whether Juniper and the brownies had been successful with the switch. The gloating look on his face sickened her. She would not relax until she had the real gingerbread girl safely with the two gingerbread boys in the cellar.

Magnus licked his fingers. “Try harder next time.” He tucked the empty box into her basket of sweets, looped the handle over his arm, and walked out of the cottage without shutting the door.

She swiped a tear from her cheek and counted out loud backwards from sixty. “... four, three, two, one.”

Juniper popped out from under the basket and zipped out the window.

“We got her!” Cork jumped out of the cabinet. “She’s safe!”

Broom stood just inside, hugging the gingerbread girl to his chest.

Evony fetched a box from under the bed, already packed with soft straw. Once the cookie girl was safely inside, she twirled the spoon wand above her head and said, “Myself.”

Juniper flew back through the window as the golden dust burst into tiny lights. He sneezed and landed on the table. “The coast is clear. He’s gone home.”

She nodded and took the box to the cellar, placing it beside two others in a locked cabinet.

Four more to go.

Broom stoked the fire and Cork put the kettle on for tea.

Evony put the unneeded gingerbread cookies on a plate and dropped into a chair. “You’ve all done well. Thank you.” They sat still and quiet, listening to the fire crackling and the leaves rustling outside the windows.

“The water is boiling,” Broom eventually announced.

Evony poured them all tea and pushed the plate of cookies towards the brownies, who eagerly claimed one apiece. Juniper nibbled on the third.

She grimaced. “I still can’t get used to seeing you eat gingerbread cookies. Doesn’t it seem weird?”

“Not weird at all.” He sniffed. “I know what I am. I have no problem eating flour and sugar and spices baked into a tasty treat. *I* wasn’t baked, therefore, *I* am not a cookie.” He broke off a leg and slurped his tea.

Cork and Broom had their heads close together and were quietly discussing their plans for the evening.

“What about that knobby oak?” Cork said. “Lots of nooks and crannies for hiding things.”

“We’ve been over that one twice,” Broom said. “I think we should look higher.”

“Why don’t we ask some mice to search around?” Cork suggested.

Broom rolled his eyes. “They have no self control. If they found anything, they’d eat it and *then* tell us. Besides, don’t you think he’d keep them where the mice can’t get to them?”

“So, we should look higher,” Cork said, as if Broom hadn’t already suggested that.

“Good luck with your searching.” Juniper flew to his potpourri bed and nestled in. “I’m going to sleep.”

“Remember,” Evony said to the brownies, “if you find the cookie people he stole, even one of them, leave them where they are. They’re too delicate for you to move them yourselves.”

“As soon as we find them, you’ll be free, though, right?” Cork bounced on his toes.

“If we can steal them back, or even find where they’re hidden, then perhaps we can do something about Magnus,” she said. Until then, he had the advantage, and they were stuck playing his game each night. But he didn’t know about *their* game. One way or another, they would take back every person he’d stolen and put an end to his threats.

If all went well, tomorrow they would trick one more cookie person from the hands of the gingerbread man.

THE NEXT MORNING, EVONY knelt in the garden, chewing a nail as she pondered her options for that day’s potion trial. “Goldenrod, geraniums, glorybower ...”

“You’re going to try another flower?” Juniper perched on the lantern, his sugary brown skin sparkling in the light.

“I don’t see why not.” Her mother had loved flowers. She was as likely to have used one as the final ingredient as anything else. “Which do you think?”

“The white geraniums.” He flew over to one and sliced the stem with a sharp candy-glass talon.

Evony added it to her basket along with two more.

“Pick more rosemary, too,” Juniper said.

“Why?”

“For the lemon cake you’re making today.”

She chuckled and plucked a handful of the herb. Juniper rode in the basket as she walked the pebble path back to the cottage. He pointed out exactly which lemons to pick, and she tucked them in beside him.

A few yards from the woodshed, they came across Magnus picking up white pebbles and putting them in a pouch slung across his shoulder. He wore the same clothes he’d been in the night before. Somehow, the pink and mint green looked more at home among the lemon trees than they had in the rustic cottage, although they suited him no better.

It was too late to backtrack and try to sneak around him.

Magnus stood and squinted at her. He had no lantern of his own, but he could doubtless make out the bright pebbles in the pre-dawn gloom. A pleased grin spread across his face as he walked slowly towards her. “My queen seeks an audience with her king. How delightful. What brings you to me at this early hour?”

Juniper hid, flattening himself behind the lemons.

She walked backward, matching him step for step, taking advantage of the space to keep him at a distance. She wouldn't let him corner her like he did in the cottage.

His grin widened, as if he knew exactly what she was doing. He didn't stop advancing.

Ignoring his question, she gestured to the pebbles, lacing her words with disgust to discourage him from coming any closer. “You’re not doing that again, are you?” she asked, her sweaty hands slicking the basket handle.

He stopped walking and his grin faltered. “If I had a little more confidence in your abilities, my sweet, I would have no need.” Magnus tossed the pebble in his hand and caught it. “You certainly didn’t take after your mother, did you? You don’t even look like her.”

He'd finally noticed that, had he?

He tossed the pebble again. “You must take after your father.”

Evony bristled. Neither she nor Magnus had ever met her father, a red-haired wanderer who’d broken her mother’s heart. And Magnus had known the witch herself for only six months before she’d died, her last days spent pouring everything she had into creating the potion Evony was trying to duplicate. The potion to make him human.

“If you’d stop eating the *gingerbread,* you would have no need for this.”

He looked confused and spoke slowly, as if trying to understand her. “You’re questioning my methods?”

She opened her mouth to confirm that she was questioning not only his methods but also his motives.

“I would think hard about your answer, my sweet queen.” He squeezed the pebble in his fist. *Crack*. “I get awfully hungry at night.”

Juniper gasped.

She bit her lip and said nothing. She couldn’t take the risk that he might eat even one of the last four gingerbread people.

Satisfied with her silence, he stowed the pebble in his pouch and picked up another handful. “I do wish the crows would stop stealing my trail of breadcrumbs.” Whistling, he turned and headed north in the direction of the village.

She would *not* let him lead anyone to the cottage.

And it was a *magpie* stealing the pebbles. And a dragon.

Unsettled, she set down the lantern, stepped off the path, and walked a short distance to the blackberry patch at the south end of the lemon grove. Magnus obviously hoped to entice some unwary traveler to the cottage, someone desperate enough to venture into the forest in search of an alternate route across the river to avoid the troll’s toll bridge. The troll was harmless enough, but his fee was steep for those with nothing to their name.

She picked berries in the thin morning light, ignoring the burning prickle of thorns. Back when Magnus had used real crusts of bread, the crows *had* stolen his trail. But his pebbles worked no better, partly because desperate strangers were now warned away with stories about the wicked old witch who lived in the woods. It’s why Evony never dared enter the village as anyone other than Helga. With no kinship to any locals, Evony appearing as a newcomer trading for bits and bobs each month would be suspicious. And if people got curious enough, or suspected the witch was gone, they might investigate.

Magnus might welcome an extra cookie person or two, but he would not take kindly to strangers invading his domain.

As she tossed one last handful of berries into the basket, Cork and Broom came into view running full tilt and glancing over their shoulders. Cork carried a pale blue egg in his arms.

“What are you two up to now?” she said.

“Ack!” Startled, Cork stopped so quickly that Broom collided with him and knocked him off balance. Cork nearly dropped the egg, but he managed to juggle it back into position. “Nothing!”

“What ... what are you doing here?” Broom asked.

Juniper glared at them over the side of the basket. “Picking berries. You?”

“We’re just ...” Broom pointed over his shoulder and then looked at the egg. “Uh ...”

Evony raised an eyebrow.

Cork kicked at the dirt. “We found a goldfinch egg. There’s a mourning dove nest back behind the barn. We were just ... going to switch them for a bit of fun. I’ll go put it back.”

“See that you do, and then meet me at the cottage. You’re the gingerbread pattern today.”

He perked up.

Juniper jumped out of the basket. “I’m heading out to pick up pebbles once that *fiend* has had enough of a head start.”

“That again?” Broom rolled his eyes. “I’ll lasso a magpie and give you a hand.”

Juniper flew off with Broom on his back, and Cork ran to undo their mischief. Evony continued on to the candy cottage alone. She fetched the lantern and blew out the flame. Dawn had arrived, and she’d missed the chance to greet her home at first light.

She stepped around the woodshed and caught her breath. The magic had outdone itself today.

Jewel-toned spice drops glistened over every inch of the cottage—orange, yellow, red, green, and purple. She breathed deeply. Clove, spearmint, licorice, and all manner of spices mingled with the sugary-sweet citrus scent coming from the roof, which was thatched with candied lemon peels. White and black spice drops framed clear candy-glass windows, and a giant sugar cookie formed the door. For once, there was not a crumb of gingerbread to be seen.

Cork greeted her inside, his hand paused midair clutching a raisin. Her breakfast bowl stood across from him on the table, half a dozen raisins inside and as many scattered beside it. She must have been staring at the cottage longer than she’d realized. She threw slightly fewer oats into the pot than usual since Juniper and Broom would be out most of the day moving Magnus’s pebbles. Then she got to work on the gingerbread dough. Cork did his part as the cutout, and she only had to smooth out one footprint.

By late afternoon, she’d finished making the gingerbread cookies, completed and unveiled another disappointing potion using the white geraniums, and tried and failed to melt some lemon thatching on the stove. She’d also baked gingersnaps, lemon rosemary tarts, and rosemary lavender cake.

“What do you say to a bit of gardening while we wait for them to return?” Evony put her hands to her lower back and stretched from side to side to ease the stiffness.

Cork nodded his agreement and jumped out the window. He hadn’t left her side all day. As a rule, brownies traveled in pairs and seldom spent time apart until they were ready to marry and go their own ways, although Cork and Broom tolerated short separations as long they each had either her or Juniper for company. As they were much too young to think of settling down, they spent nearly every waking hour getting into mischief together. Or being helpful, depending on their mood.

Evony rolled her braid into a low knot at the base of her neck, pinned it in place, and then joined Cork in the garden. The shadows lengthened as they worked, and Juniper and Broom had still not returned.

Cork had given up pulling weeds and was searching for mushrooms by the fence. He stopped suddenly and climbed a post. “Do you hear that?”

Evony strained her ears in vain. Perhaps he’d heard Broom’s magpie. “I don’t—”

“There it is again. It’s a man’s voice!” He stared at her with a worried gaze.

She heard it that time and stood quickly. Was Magnus returning early? But, no, the voice was too soft to belong to the gingerbread man. He wasn’t known for talking to himself, either.

“The pebble path must have worked after all,” she said in a hushed tone. Where were Broom and Juniper?

“First time for everything,” Cork muttered as he jumped off the fence. “C’mon!”

She followed him back to the cottage, where they hid themselves while peeking out the candy-glass window in the front.

The voice slowly grew louder. The man seemed to be talking to someone. A few minutes later, he emerged into the clearing and stopped mid-step. He stumbled but righted himself immediately, his gaze never leaving the cottage. He appeared to be alone.

It was the man from the village, the one she'd hired to carry her things. His cloak was as drab as before, but it was clean, as was the rest of him. His hair still looked windblown, and his clothes still hung loose, but his bulging pack strained against its straps.

He hadn't listened to her advice. He wasn't supposed to be here.

Her cheeks shouldn't have warmed in delight at seeing him again.

Cork tugged on her sleeve and pointed. "A pixie!"

Evony saw her then. A pixie roughly the same size as Cork and Broom flitted out from the canopy and flew circles around the man's head. It was to her that he spoke. Orange pixie dust surrounded her in a gentle cloud and left a trail wherever she went. Evony had never seen a pixie. They avoided the cottage, no doubt due to its reputation—her mother's wards only worked on animals.

As the pair inched closer, Evony continued to watch them, especially the man. The setting sun illuminated his face perfectly, and the way he stared at the cottage intrigued her. Not like a hungry vagabond, but more like someone who'd seen their life's dream come to fruition. Like a blacksmith who'd just forged a golden sword, or a seamstress who'd sewn a dress of starlight and silver.

Or a baker who's seen the building blocks of his trade in a way he'd never imagined. She knew that look of wonder, although she'd never seen it in her own eyes.

The man tore his gaze from the cottage long enough to take in the lemon grove with an appreciative eye. He looked over at the barn in the distance and the chickens milling around, almost as if he were surprised to see such mundane things in close proximity to the fanciful candy cottage before him.

The pixie landed on his shoulder. They spoke softly for several minutes, and then he approached, pausing in awe every two or three steps.

"What do we do?" Cork whispered. "He's going to eat it! You told us what happens when they eat it!"

"Hush. Give me a moment to think."

The man's words finally became understandable. He was speaking with the pixie about the ingredients needed to make a good spice drop, that he'd never seen such vibrant colors and craftsmanship, and that the door alone was a work of art.

He had to be a baker.

"What are you doing?" Juniper flew in through the back window and skidded to a stop on the table.

Broom followed on his magpie and landed on the counter. He dismounted, but the bird didn't leave. "I promised him some gingerbread."

Evony fetched a gingersnap from the basket she'd prepared for Magnus and tossed it to the bird. He caught it midair and then flew out the window with a muffled *caw* of thanks.

Juniper paced. "The fiend is on his way! We've got barely five minutes before he gets here!"

How could she have forgotten the time? She fetched the gingerbread cookies, the golden cauldron, and an empty box from the cellar and laid them on the counter. "You lot get everything ready."

"What about the man?" Cork asked as he dragged the box into its hiding spot.

"Leave him to me. It's too late to chase him away." And even assuming she succeeded in doing so, Magnus would likely hear and give chase. As Juniper and the brownies readied things, she twirled the spoon wand over her head. "Witch."

Once the golden sparkles settled, she tucked the spoon wand deep into her greasy apron pocket. Taking a deep breath, she stepped out into the waning light.

Chapter Five

As Evony stepped out of the cottage, she saw the stranger off to her left, poised with a purple spice drop in his hand.

"Stop!" she yelled hoarsely. Counting on the element of surprise, she rushed over and knocked the spice drop to the ground. She grabbed his wrist tightly, noting the look of shock in his eyes, and dragged him towards the door. His wrist was thinner than she expected for someone so tall.

He put up no fight. The pixie on his shoulder clung to his collar and remained silent, perhaps taking her cues from him.

"Thought you could eat my house, did you?" Evony talked as she pulled him with her. "Thought you could steal from me, eh?"

"It's *her*," the pixie squeaked into the man's ear.

Good. They remembered her, although Evony didn't remember the pixie. Perhaps the two of them had heard the stories, as well. She didn't care what got him into the house, as long as he didn't put up a fuss.

Magnus's whistling reached her ears.

She squeezed the man's wrist so tightly her own fingers ached and dragged him through the door before he could make a sound and give himself away. His resistance was minimal, as if the candy cottage itself had put him under a spell. He swayed on his feet when the door shut behind him. Perhaps fatigue had something to do with his lack of struggle, as well.

Evony looked him in the eyes and said, "You're in no danger, dearie, if you do as I say." She opened the cellar door and nudged him towards the stairs while letting go of his arm. "Go on now, and don't make a peep. No matter what you see or hear."

He paused, and she gave him a none-too-gentle shove. The pixie urged him to obey, perhaps realizing that her small magic would be nothing compared to a witch powerful enough to create what they'd just seen. As soon as they were downstairs, Evony shut the cellar door and pushed a storage chest on top to secure them in.

"We're ready!" Broom waved from the cupboard and then ducked inside.

Evony wanted nothing more than to sink into a chair and enjoy a hot cup of tea and a lemon tart with her friends in peace and quiet. Instead, she twirled the spoon wand over her head and said, "Princess." A wave of dizziness swept over her, and she sat down in spite of herself, flinging the spoon wand under the bed in her haste. She'd not changed disguises so often in such a short span since she was a child.

The door burst open, and Magnus strode into the room. He looked momentarily confused when he saw her sitting in a chair.

She stood too quickly, still out of breath, and braced herself with a hand on the table. Her fingers stirred up orange pixie dust, and she brushed it off behind her back. The dust had settled here and there, but in such a small amount that Magnus surely wouldn't see it.

She tried to calm her racing heart as he looked her over, thankful that he couldn't make out the expression on her face. He wore a bright red tunic tonight, with matching trousers. The snowy white undershirt made him look like a peppermint candy. She'd not noticed what the spoon wand had put her in, and glanced at her skirts. Wonderful—more peppermint. The white gown was striped

diagonally from high collar to lacy hem in at least three shades of red. A thick crimson sash circled her waist and gathered in a bow at the back.

Seeming pleased with their matching attire, Magnus approached and pulled her braid over her shoulder, his other hand gripping his basket. The tidy knot at her neck had been replaced with elaborate twists of red locks interwoven with white ribbons, making her own hair into a kind of peppermint stick. He lifted the ends to his nose and inhaled deeply. Frowning, he dropped the braid and sniffed the air.

"Lemon. Rosemary, again." He seemed pleased with himself for having guessed the new herb so soon after discovering it. "Lavender and cinnamon and ... something else."

Evony took a step back lest he see the panic in her eyes. "No greeting for your queen tonight?"

His lips curved in a wicked grin, and he spoke hesitantly. Hopefully. "Is there, perhaps, a new gingerbread cookie tonight ... my queen?"

She knew it. He could smell the man, even with all the baking scents filling the room. She could lie to him, but if he found out—and he would, eventually—his anger would burn hot and quick and unpredictably.

His grin turned to a snarl, and the basket handle crunched in his fist. He hadn't yet handed over the gingerbread person.

"There's no cookie ..." She trailed off at the disbelief on his face. She would have to tell part of the truth, or he wouldn't buy it. "Someone did show up, but he's awfully thin. He would make a terrible gingerbread man. Too crumbly to be any use. I thought I would fatten him up for a few days first."

His disbelief turned to confusion, but he was listening.

"There's no need to take chances and rush things when we still have a few cookies left."

He set the basket on the table. "You may be right. At least we know my trail of breadcrumbs works." He glanced around the room, squinting into the corners. "Where is he?"

"In the cellar."

He stared at the chest covering the door as if he'd never seen it before. Perhaps he hadn't. A full minute passed before he spoke again. "Be sure he eats his fair share and more. And don't feed him any of the cottage sweets without me present. I want to see at least one transformation with my own eyes."

Evony shivered in revulsion at the eagerness in his voice.

Magnus handed her the box and took his place in front of the counter. "You may proceed."

After a glance at the cellar door, Evony placed the box next to Juniper's basket. If the man found the chink in the floor, he would be able to see everything. She knew from her time growing up in the cottage that he could probably hear most of it, too, although he doubtless had no clue what was happening.

She opened the box. "A boy," she whispered. She measured out one third of the potion, as required, and poured it on the gingerbread. White smoke billowed forth, just as she expected, but the smoke held an orange sparkle, no doubt from the lingering pixie dust in the room. Surrounding them as it did, Magnus had no trouble seeing it.

"What ...?" Rather than wait for the smoke to dissipate as usual, he tried to fan it away. A lemon-scented breeze from the windows aided his efforts, and for a split second, the counter appeared empty.

A puff of smoke wafted in front of them and then out the window like a reveler late to a party. The gingerbread boy became visible to the left of where Evony had laid him.

Chomp. Crunch. Gulp.

Magnus turned his gaze to her, a worrisome glint in his eyes. “Those little lights—you must be getting close.” He brushed her jaw with his fingertips. “Well done, my sweet.”

She recoiled from the gritty, cookie-texture of his skin.

Grinning, he picked up the basket of sweets, tucked the empty box under his arm, and walked out of the cottage with a bounce in his step.

Squeezing her eyes shut, Evony brushed crumbs from her face, unsure if they came from the cookie Magnus had eaten or from Magnus himself. She counted backwards from sixty, finishing a little faster than usual.

Cork burst from the cabinet. “We got the cookie! Now what are we gonna do with the man in the cellar?”

Juniper crawled out from under the basket. “Don’t do anything until I get back.” He darted out the window to shadow Magnus’s departure.

While they waited, Evony placed the gingerbread boy into his box. She needed to get him to the safety of the cabinet in the cellar, but the stranger and his pixie were there, and she still wasn’t sure what to do about them.

Juniper soon returned and announced that Magnus was moving quickly and was well on his way.

“So, what are we going to do with our guests?” Cork asked again.

Magnus knew the man was here. If she couldn’t convince him to stay, she had no doubt that Magnus would hunt him down.

She stowed the box with the gingerbread boy safely under the bed for the time being and retrieved the spoon wand. She pushed the chest off the cellar door and then opened it slowly.

“You can come upstairs now.”

The man obeyed, the pixie still clinging to his shoulder, and then stared at her with his mouth open the slightest bit.

Now what?

The man spoke first, his voice hesitant but not frightened. “So ... are you a witch or a princess?”

She glanced at the gown she was still wearing and the spoon in her hand. “Oh, um ...” For a split second, she considered becoming the witch again, but she’d never kept up the disguise long term, and she had no desire to do so now. Besides, lying to him would not gain his trust, and she needed that in order to keep him safe. She waved the spoon wand and quickly changed back into her own cap-sleeved, sky blue dress and grey apron, her hair hanging ribbon-free down her back. “Neither. I’m just a baker.”

His eyes lit up with amusement as they followed the movement of the wand. “Just a baker, eh?”

She tucked the spoon into her apron. “That’s not mine. I’m not a ... witch. I’m ... .” She was babbling.

“Just a baker,” he finished with a smile.

She smiled nervously in return.

Juniper glided to the table and interrupted the awkward exchange. “If you two are done making doe eyes at each other, we need to get that gingerbread boy to safety.”

Evony’s cheeks burned with embarrassment. She glared at him and mumbled, “I wasn’t making doe eyes.” She fetched the box and walked past the man to the cellar door. Before she went down the stairs, she turned to him and said, “Please, have a seat. I’ll try to explain what’s going on in a moment. Don’t ... don’t go anywhere. He’ll find you if you do.”

When she returned, the man was in the corner looking over the bottles and ingredients on the shelves, hands clasped behind his back. Juniper stood at the edge of the loft bed, glaring down at him with wings spread.

Cork had climbed into the potpourri bed and was throwing dried leaves and twigs at the pixie, who expertly dodged the projectiles.

“Stop flying around everywhere!” Broom hollered at the pixie as he ran back and forth on the table. “You’re making a mess!”

Her dust was indeed making a mess, but it was certainly a pretty one.

Evony cleared her throat, and the man turned around. He appeared cautious and curious, but not scared. If he were truly scared, he would have run out of the cottage already, regardless of her warning. He’d placed his pack beside the door, as if planning to stay a while.

She needed to figure out what kind of man followed a witch into the forest.

Chapter Six

Evony stared at the stranger's pack by the door, aware that he was staring at her at the same time. Why was he here? Had he followed her from the village on purpose?

Had he not heard the stories?

He'd obviously done what she'd asked and left the village, but she hadn't realized she would need to tell him to keep to the road. She'd given him enough money for the troll's toll bridge. He should have had no reason for entering the woods.

Cork lobbed an acorn cap at the pixie, but it grazed Evony's cheek instead.

She raised her eyebrows at him. "That's quite enough. All of you kindly find a place to settle and be quiet for half a minute."

Cork swung down onto the bottom bunk and crouched on her pillow. Juniper glided to the counter. Broom immediately sat down where he was on the table.

The pixie hovered and stared at her questioningly.

"Yes, you, too."

She flitted to the table and perched on the edge farthest away from Broom.

"Why are you here?" Evony spoke as sternly as she could to the man, but she wasn't sure it came off properly given her nervous state at the moment. She was also well aware that he was taller, and no doubt stronger, than she was. If he wanted, he could push right past her and leave at any time.

His lips quirked as if he wanted to smile again. "Because you dragged me inside and threw me into your cellar."

Her eyes narrowed at his attempt at humor, although she appreciated that he didn't seem angry or on the verge of running away. She crossed her arms and waited for his real answer.

He moved to stand beside his pixie and spoke to her in an aside. "I didn't think she'd buy that."

The pixie rolled her eyes.

He addressed Evony. "I'm lost, but only partly. I mean, I found what I was looking for ... although I wasn't looking for it until recently." He looked confused at his own words as he swayed on his feet.

He must have been more tired than she'd thought, and who knew when he'd last eaten. She pulled out a chair and waved him into it. "Sit."

He sank into the chair with a grateful sigh and watched her as she worked. The brownies jumped in to help, but Juniper kept a watchful eye on the strangers. Entertaining visitors was foreign to her, especially human ones, but she knew how to feed people. She soon put a steaming mug of tea in front of the man, poured in a liberal amount of cream, and stirred in two heaping spoonfuls of sugar.

After serving Juniper and the brownies, she offered the pixie a thimbleful and watched in fascination as she took it delicately in her hands. While close to the same height as the brownies, the pixie was much daintier, her iridescent dragonfly wings hanging at her back like supple candy-glass. Her wispy hair was almost the same bright orange as her dust, which continued to flake off around her and fall like tiny autumn leaves in a gentle breeze.

Evony set out plates of buttered bread, lemon rosemary tarts, and gingersnaps, as well as boiled eggs, dried apple slices, and slabs of hard cheese.

Neither the man nor the pixie touched anything.

Juniper hopped over, grabbed an egg, and flew back to the counter with his cumbersome load. “Oh, for goodness’ sake, it’s not poisoned. If she’d wanted to do you any harm, she would have let you eat the house.”

After a short pause, the man said, “Fair enough.” He gulped the hot tea and helped himself to a lemon tart.

The pixie did the same, breaking off the corner of his pastry. Cork and Broom sipped their tea and eyed the leftover gingerbread cookies. Evony slid Juniper his share and then set those out, too. The brownies snatched one each before the strangers got too bold. They never finished the cookies in one sitting, and Evony could only guess where they hid the leftovers to snack on.

The man looked askance at the cookies and then glanced at Juniper.

She’d become so accustomed to her dragon’s appearance that she seldom considered how he would look to outsiders. “Those are just cookies they’re eating. He’s ... not. It’s complicated.”

“We overheard a few things from the cellar,” the pixie said. Even her voice was delicate.

“What exactly did you hear?”

“More importantly,” said Juniper, “how much of it did you understand?”

Cork spoke around a bite of gingerbread. “But first, who are you two?” He tossed a clump of sugar from the bowl into Evony’s tea, splashing Broom and earning him a dirty look.

The man glanced at his pixie and then answered Cork’s question first. “My name is Hansel, and this is my companion, Gretel.” He paused as if waiting for his hosts to supply their names. When no one did, he added, “I’m a baker from Farland, and we’re searching for a new home.”

“What’s wrong with your old one?” Cork asked.

“Famine. Widespread, due to mismanagement. My master kicked me out. He’d rather sell the bread I eat than keep feeding it to me.”

Gretel gave him a sideways glance. “It also might have had something to do with your difficulty being stingy with those who couldn’t pay.”

He shrugged. “When I have a shop of my own, I can do as I please.”

Although he was making light of the situation, Evony could see the pain in his eyes. “You said in the village that you were headed to Eastland. This cottage is not exactly on the way.”

“Yes, well ... when we stayed overnight at the inn, we heard rumors of a gingerbread castle. I had to see such a thing for myself, although they warned me to stay away.”

“Why didn’t you?”

Gretel piped up. “Mr. Act-First-Think-Later couldn’t pass up the opportunity.”

“I’d come so far,” he said, ignoring Gretel. “I expected you to be here, you know. I mean, the witch. After your kindness to me, I suspected the rumors might not all be true. Besides, what did I have to lose?”

Juniper snorted, well acquainted with what he had to lose.

“What I didn’t expect was the young lady with fiery curls and rosy cheeks I see before me now. I wonder which is your true form.” The grin at the corner of his mouth teased her.

Her cheeks flamed at the unexpected compliment, as if they weren’t already red enough from all the excitement. As red as peppermint. He’d seen her in that gown earlier, with the crimson sash at the waist.

What were they talking about?

“She’s not using a glamour now,” Gretel said. Her wings fluttered minutely, and a sparkle of dust wafted in Cork’s direction. He waved it away like a cloud of mosquitoes. “Neither is that talking dragon cookie, which I can’t figure out.”

Juniper bristled and swallowed a bite of gingerbread. “I am *not* a cookie. How was I to know the house was cursed when I ate it? And my name is Juniper.”

Gretel said, “I beg your pardon.”

At the same time, Hansel said, “Pleased to meet you.” His eyes lit up. “I’ve never met a real dragon before.”

Juniper nodded to them, obviously satisfied with their responses.

“Are we to know your name as well, my lady?” Hansel asked.

She took a gulp of warm tea, trying to process being called a lady. “I told you I’m just a baker. My name is Evony, and this is Cork and Broom.” She pointed to the brownies each in turn, and they waved.

Hansel stood and bowed, a little steadier on his feet after eating. “At your service.” After he sat again, he added, “And you have my thanks for saving my life yet again. I believe you’ve kept me from suffering the same fate as that small gingerbread boy, if I’m not mistaken.”

Feeling awkward and unsure of how to accept his gratitude, she repeated Juniper’s earlier question. “How much do you understand about what’s going on?”

“Well, hmm ... .” Hansel took time to eat a gingersnap and swallow the last of his tea. After Evony refilled his mug, he continued. “The way I see it, you, Evony the baker, live in a magical, poisonous candy house with a tiny gingerbread dragon and two brownies. There’s a giant gingerbread man who visits you, and you trick him into thinking he’s eating real gingerbread people. You save the real gingerbread people? And you’re not a witch.”

Broom looked impressed. “That’s it in a nutshell.”

His assessment impressed Evony, too. She turned her mug in a slow circle, wondering what to say to fill in the gaps of his understanding.

Why did she want him to understand? She couldn’t answer that question, but suddenly, she wanted very much to talk to someone about what she’d been going through.

“My mother was the ... witch, although she looked nothing like what I did in the village. She looked much like me, only with black hair, and she was smart and hardworking and loyal. She died four months ago. She overextended herself trying to create a potion to finish turning the gingerbread man she’d created into a human.”

“I’m sorry,” Hansel said. His hand moved as if to take hers, to offer comfort, but he stopped and put both hands in his lap.

Gretel spoke softly. “I guess she didn’t succeed.”

“Oh, no, she did,” Evony said. “I mean, she created a potion that works to reverse the effects of the candy cottage on humans. She tested it on one of the cookie people before Magnus stole them all, and I saw the man running away through the forest. But the final ingredient in the book is smudged. We’ve been trying to figure out what it is so I can turn the rest of the gingerbread people, and Juniper, back into their true forms.”

“That’s why you tricked him into giving you the boy tonight?” Gretel asked.

She nodded.

Hansel leaned forward on the table. “What about the gingerbread man?”

Cork jumped to his feet. “*He’s* never been human, so there’s no changing him back.”

“Magnus is my mother’s creation,” Evony said. “He never ate any part of the candy cottage. I don’t even know if the potion will work on him, and I won’t risk trying. Once the people are free, I’ll have to figure out what to do with him. He’ll be angry, and I’m worried about what he might do.”

Hansel rubbed the stubble on his chin. “If you’d said any of that to me when I first arrived, I wouldn’t have understood a word of it.”

“And now?”

“I *think* I understand.” He paused and glanced at Gretel, who shrugged. “This house is amazing. I’ve never seen anything like it. But why make it poisonous? And why is Juniper alive, but the other cookies are not?”

Evony took a moment to gather her words, wanting him to understand. “My mother made the cottage for me when I was a child, but she didn’t trust people and disliked visitors. She spread stories about the house to keep people away, but some still found it by accident. As for Juniper, who knows? My mother guessed it was because dragons have a small amount of innate magic. It’s what gave her the idea to create the gingerbread man.”

“*He* was for Evony, too,” Broom said, as if speaking of a worm.

Cork added, somewhat sarcastically, “A husband for her dearest daughter.”

Hansel looked as disgusted at that idea as Evony had always felt. She’d tried to tell her mother she would have nothing to do with such a plan, but by then, her mother had been consumed by her project. As much as Evony missed her now, she didn’t miss the growing obsession with spells and potions. Once the gingerbread man was gone—and the cottage along with him—perhaps she could remember her mother the way she’d been before creating him.

Gretel rose into the air. “I never did like witches.” She glanced at Evony. “Begging your pardon.”

“It’s all right. My mother loved me, but I know what she was. What she did. And I’ll do everything I can to undo it.” She sighed, suddenly weary. She was unused to explaining her complicated life to others and still had questions herself about how to proceed. “I’m sure you’re tired from your travels. I’ll show you where you can sleep for the night.”

She feared Hansel might refuse her hospitality after learning the truth, that she might have to convince him to stay or maybe even threaten him. Instead, he offered to refill the wood bin by the stove, and Gretel pitched in to clean up the kitchen, although the brownies seemed put out at the amount of orange dust that collected on the surfaces. Evony reminded them it would be gone by morning. Pixie dust only lasted for a few hours, give or take, before disappearing.

She settled Hansel and Gretel in the cellar with some extra blankets. Juniper gave up his pillow for Hansel and brought Gretel an armload of fresh flower petals for a bed, while Broom produced a tiny blanket from some hidden nook and gave it to her with a bashful grin.

Evony fell asleep with a small seed of hope in her chest, unexplainable but there nonetheless. If she failed going forward, perhaps at the very least, she would be a little less alone for a while.

Chapter Seven

Evony snugged her cloak around her shoulders against the morning chill and ran her fingers over the goldenrods in the garden, hesitant about adding them to her basket. She'd tried two types of flowers, and both had failed to produce the desired results. There had to be something else.

"What about gammon?" Cork asked. He was struggling through the hyssop in search of a frog that kept eluding him.

"My mother never used meat in her potions."

Cork dove into the shrub and then crowed in triumph. He held up a tiny frog the size of his head, its legs dangling and kicking in protest.

Broom ran into the lantern light, a tuft of mouse fur in each hand. "What did you find?"

Cork shielded the frog with his body and spoke over his shoulder. "A lightning bug. Wanna see?"

With a dubious look, Broom approached. Cork spun around and loosed the frog, which smacked against Broom's chest and knocked him over. Roaring with laughter, Cork ran off into the shadows.

Broom stood and handed Evony the mouse fur. "That's for Gretel." He brushed himself off and then dashed after his friend.

She tucked the fur into the basket, still no closer to choosing an ingredient.

Baah. The nanny goat bleated a greeting to someone.

"Good morning." Hansel entered the garden and joined her. His hair was damp and he wore the sheepskin mittens.

A warmth that had nothing to do with the rising sun spread through her at the sight of him. "I thought you might sleep in. You've had a long journey."

"Baker, remember? Old habit." He sat on the ground next to her. "Actually, Juniper woke me and showed me to the stream. If he were a regular-sized dragon, I think he would have bodily picked me up and dunked me."

She chuckled.

He pulled his hood over his wet hair. The cloak was clean but could still use some mending. "Juniper says he'll keep watch for 'that fiend.'"

She gathered some hyssop to dry for winter. If nothing else came to her, she would pick some goldenrod for the potion. "Is baking a family trade?"

He shook his head. "This isn't the first time I've been sent on my way. My father remarried when I was five. A year later, his wife had her own son and insisted I was one mouth too many to feed." He studied his hands. Specks of pixie dust on the mittens sparkled in the lantern light. "They didn't have much, so I suppose it wasn't the worst idea. Father was able to get me an apprenticeship with a distant relative in Farland."

Her heart ached for him. She couldn't imagine being forced to leave home for essentially just existing and eating. And he'd gone through it twice.

"I met Gretel six years later," he said softly. "She's been with me ever since."

Evony swallowed. "I was the same age when I met Juniper."

"Did you get a chance to fly with him? Before ..."

Before he ate the candy house. "No. I never even had time to warn him. I asked my mother to let me keep him, though. He was too small to pose a threat, plus she was fascinated at his reaction to her

magic, so she agreed. He was quite angry at first and spewed clouds of cinnamon every day, but I finally gained his trust. He told me stories of things outside the forest. Things my mother never would have shared. When this is all over, he's going to fly us far away from here."

"Where will you go?"

She placed the hyssop in the basket. "I ... I don't know. I haven't had time to stop and think that far ahead." That wasn't completely true. She'd thought about it almost every day since meeting Juniper, but she was no closer to figuring out her future than she was to finding her mother's missing ingredient. "What are your plans once you get to Eastland?" she asked.

"I've got my guild membership, and that's all I need to set up my own bakery."

She gave him an incredulous look.

"Well, maybe not *all* I need. A shop would come in handy, and ... I could use some skilled help." He smiled. "An apprentice, perhaps?"

There was that seed of hope again. She should dig it out before it rooted too deeply. "We should get back to the house soon. Lots of work to do."

"Let me help." Hansel stood and took the basket.

"Wait," she said.

He looked around as if he'd missed something.

"I haven't chosen an ingredient for the potion, yet." She explained how she needed to successfully complete the transforming potion before she ran out of her mother's other unique concoctions. "Once those are gone, there's no hope of changing anyone back."

"What have you tried so far?"

She ticked them off on her fingers. "Goat cheese, golden larch, garlic, gladiolus, and then geraniums yesterday."

"So, it has to start with a 'g'?"

"Yes. That's the only thing we know for sure. It's the only letter not smudged."

Hansel leaned against the garden fence and propped the basket on his knee. "Do you have anything in mind?"

Raising the lantern, she leaned next to him and surveyed the garden. "Goldenrod, maybe, but we've already tried flowers twice."

"I'm assuming you've thought of ginger already. How about gooseberries?"

"They're both already included."

"Raisins?" He glanced at the nanny nibbling weeds outside the fence behind him.

"Wrong letter."

"They're made from grapes."

She hadn't thought of that. "I'm not sure I want to risk wasting potions on a technicality."

"How about gelatin, goose eggs—"

"We don't have geese, but ... gelatin?"

"The spice drops on the house made me think of it. Do you have any?"

The seed grew a little more. She pushed away from the fence and led him out of the garden. "Yes, I do." She'd set it aside to make some candies for Cork and Broom.

Hansel followed her along the white pebble path. He'd approached the cottage from the forest the day before, in the evening. Evony wanted him to see it the way she did, bright and new in the first light of morning.

At the woodshed, she took his mittened hand to stop him.

He gave her a questioning look.

“Wait for the sun.” She breathed deeply, and he copied her. The heady scent of a dozen warm spices filled the air. Nutmeg, anise, mace, and cloves.

“Is that cardamom?” he said, almost reverently. “And vanilla?”

She nodded. The candy cottage spared no expense.

They didn’t have to wait long. Before Evony could count to ten, the sun crested the canopy and flooded the clearing. She nudged Hansel forward, and he took several eager strides, pulling her with him.

She’d forgotten to let go of his hand.

He stopped cold, and his jaw dropped. Awe and wonder lit his face just as it had the first time, mingled with a generous amount of confusion.

Evony laughed.

The cottage had changed back into its gingerbread base, the walls etched with the shapes of vines and roses. Golden pie crust, twisted into braids, lined the eaves and twined thickly over the peach pie roof. Syrupy golden filling dripped down the sides in half a dozen places. Cinnamon sticks formed the chimney and door like tiny aromatic logs, while crystallized ginger lined the yellow candy-glass windows.

Hansel squeezed her hand. “Your mother created this for you?”

Her smile disappeared and she nodded.

“She must have loved you very much.”

An unexpected tear rolled down her cheek. No one had ever understood that. The villagers feared the witch, and Juniper despised the creator of his curse. But the woman underneath all that had been tender with her daughter.

“She tried,” Evony said. “My mother thought she was keeping me safe from whatever had disappointed her so badly.”

He reached over and dried her face with his mittened fingers. Once again, she noticed that his eyes were the same molasses brown as his hair.

“Ah, there you are!” Cork peeked out the open window. “Evony, you have to try these! They’re delicious!”

Hansel chuckled. “I never imagined brownies would be so ... visible.”

“They’re a special pair, that’s for sure.” What was Cork talking about?

Evony stepped over the threshold and stopped. The kitchen smelled heavenly—buttery and sugary and oat-y all at once—but she’d done no baking yet. Cork and Broom sat on the counter with Gretel eating what looked like flat, square cookies. Cork had slathered his with raspberry jam.

Hansel stood beside the door and rocked back and forth on his toes, looking pleased with himself. “You left early, so I took the liberty of making a quick breakfast. You’ve never had oat cakes?”

Broom spoke with bulging cheeks. “Ith like baked oatmeal, only better.”

Hansel had baked in her kitchen? Evony’s cheeks heated, and her neck prickled uncomfortably. She clenched her teeth and silently lifted the cellar door, not quite sure what she needed from underground. At the bottom of the stairs, she took a few steps forward and then stopped and looked around, puzzled. Something was different.

“Evony?”

She jumped at Hansel’s voice so close behind her. She hadn’t heard him follow.

“Are you all right?”

With a jolt, she realized what was wrong. “You rearranged the shelves.” She stepped over to her mother’s clay jars and started shifting them back into place. “Flour goes on the far left, then oats.

Sugars go between fruits and butter."

Hansel spoke hesitantly. "Gretel could tell the jars were fairy-spelled, so I asked Juniper about them this morning. He explained everything before he left to keep watch." He walked to her side and stopped a few feet away, peering into her face. "Did I do something wrong?"

"You should have asked. These things are ... special." She fiddled with the jars, turning them ever so slightly this way and that to line up the labels.

"I wanted to surprise you." He sounded confused. Hurt. "It's been a long while since I've had the means to bake anything. You have so much here, and you've been so generous. I didn't think you would mind."

She didn't mind. Of course she didn't—there were more than enough ingredients for both of them to make a mountain of breads and pastries.

Then why did she feel betrayed?

Her head swam with memories of her mother's hands guiding hers along the wooden rolling pin, showing her how to cut out a cookie shape just so without nicking her fingers, teaching her to nurse the fire to the perfect temperature, demonstrating which spices worked best with which treats. She remembered rainy-day picnics under the table, eating delicate tea cakes and cucumber sandwiches on fresh white bread. Long, hot summers filled with tart lemonade and strawberry pie with cream. And cool autumn evenings sitting in the warmth of the cottage, dipping gingerbread cookies into spiced hot chocolate.

She blinked rapidly, her eyelashes heavy with unshed tears, and whispered, "Only my mother and I ever baked in this cottage."

Hansel leaned heavily against the shelf. "Oh, Evony, I'm sorry. I'm such a dolt. You're right—I should have asked you before taking the liberty. I never meant to overstep, but I've done it again, haven't I?"

He sounded so forlorn, but he really hadn't done anything wrong. She was the one being a dolt. And possessive of things she should have been willing to share freely. How could she forget that he'd already been thrown out of his home twice simply for the want of food?

Impulsively, she wrapped his hands in her own and stared at them, wondering when he'd removed the mittens. "I'm the one who should be sorry. It hasn't been half a year since I lost her, and I'm new to being on my own." She raised her eyes to meet his. "I'm glad you're here, although that's probably selfish of me. Will you forgive me?"

He turned his wrists ever so slightly and laced his fingers with hers, a smile lifting the corner of his mouth. "Only if you'll forgive me ... and sample my oat cakes."

She smiled and felt as if she might float up the stairs. "Gladly, as soon as I've made the gingerbread. And if they taste as good as they smell, then you are welcome to have the use of my kitchen."

When they returned upstairs, Evony started right away on the gingerbread dough while explaining to their guests exactly how they tricked Magnus every night. Hansel worked on some oat bread, and Broom helped him, eager for a fresh loaf.

Cork sat on the top bunk and threw bits of potpourri at Gretel. Instead of dodging them this time, she transformed them briefly into something else. A dried apple peel floated away as bubbles, an acorn cap fluttered to the floor as a sprig of thyme, a stray feather from the donated pillow poofed into a cloud of breadcrumbs.

Juniper joined them for breakfast and split an oatcake with Cork, who was never too full for another bite. While they sipped their tea, Hansel told stories from his days as a baker's apprentice in

Farland. Juniper had never visited a human city, and so he listened as raptly as Evony did. They laughed as Hansel told the tale of a lap dog diving into a three-foot cake meant for his duchess, and another of a merchant who ordered a confection shaped like his wife's favorite shoe. He'd had a hand in creating those two extravagances, but most of his time had been spent baking bread and buns for everyday meals. The way he described the hustle and bustle of life in town made Evony's head spin. She wondered if she would ever fit in such a place and what people would think of her. The real her.

After breakfast, Juniper offered to make a sweep of the forest to check for more pebbles. Gretel volunteered to help, and Broom abandoned his role of cookie cutout to join them, taking his magpie reins.

Cork crowed about taking Broom's place and dutifully fulfilled his role. Once the cookies were in the oven, he swept up the mess he and Gretel had made, staring openly at Hansel and Evony, who sat at the table enjoying a second cup of tea. "I'll be having a chat with the nanny now. Her output has been down the last couple of days." With that, he hopped out the window and ran off all by himself.

Hansel raised an eyebrow in question.

Evony shrugged. She hadn't noticed any difference in the milk, but the brownies were more sensitive to such things. She set their empty mugs in the sink and then removed the cookies from the oven.

"Why do you make four when the gingerbread man only eats one?"

"We have to have one girl *and* one boy, because we don't know which he'll bring in the box. And I make an extra of each just in case one burns or breaks."

He continued asking questions while baking his bread and watching her work on the potion. She detailed everything as best she could, quietly pleased at his interest ... and the fact that she was brewing a potion like a wicked old witch and he wasn't running away.

"It's more like baking than I would have thought," he remarked. He'd positioned himself a few feet behind her, well out of the way. "It's too bad you can't read your mother's shorthand so you can create the other potions you need if you run out."

"This one is difficult enough. Some of her work took months or years to figure out, and then days or weeks to brew. And I don't have the skills, even if I could read her writing. It would be like asking a baker to forge a scythe in his kitchen using only his own ingredients."

"Did your mother not teach you anything?"

"Only baking." She double-checked one of the measurements. "She never wanted me to follow in her path. The closest I've ever gotten to using magic is the spoon wand I use for disguises, and that's not even her power. It's a fairy-spelled item she picked up somewhere long ago. Like the golden cauldron. I have no idea how to use either of them the way she did."

"Did you ever try stirring the potion with the spoon?"

"It was one of my first thoughts, but the instructions even tell me what to stir with—and it's not the magic spoon."

He exhaled with a whistle and shook his head.

She added the proper amount of gelatin, let the mixture simmer for the required number of minutes, and then removed the cauldron from the stand.

"Now what?" Hansel asked.

"We wait." She sealed it with the tight-fitting cork stopper. "It takes eight hours to cure in the cauldron."

"*In* the cauldron?"

She nodded.

“I’m asking too many questions, aren’t I?”

She grinned. “I have one for you ... just as soon as I put this in the cellar.”

He opened the cellar door while she stored the cauldron and then closed it behind her when she returned. He looked at her expectantly.

“Why have you not run away?” She busied herself gathering ingredients for her baking, trying not to seem too eager to hear his answer.

“Run away?” He blinked. “I honestly don’t know where I would go. I’m not a woodsman. I really did get lost. I mean, I was looking for this cottage, but I found it entirely by accident.” He looked down at his boots and then back at her. “Besides, you said the gingerbread man would hunt me down if I left. And ...”

She paused with the flour scoop in midair. “And?”

He rubbed the stubble on his chin. “It’s just ... I can’t walk away when people’s lives are at stake. I was already forced out by my master. At least here I may be able to do some good.”

Her eyes misted over and she dropped the scoop, flouring half the table. She blinked rapidly and began scraping up the mess with her hands. His generosity took her breath away. Did anyone with his kindness exist in the whole village? She might never know, since she’d pushed them all away. It was for their own good, but did that mean she needed to push him away, too?

Hansel wiped the table once she’d cleared the flour. Perhaps interpreting her emotions as distress for the gingerbread people, he asked, “What’s stopping us from taking the other cookies from Magnus? You have a pixie on your side now. And me.” He struck a strongman’s pose.

She laughed, touched by his bold offer, and dabbed a stray tear from her cheek. Too many tears today.

Before she could respond, Cork climbed through the window. He’d obviously overheard Hansel’s last comment. “That burnt cookie is stronger than he looks. Not too smart, but mean as a snake.”

“What’s stopping us is that we don’t know where he’s put them,” she said. “Even Cork and Broom can’t find his hiding spot, and they’ve searched almost every night.”

“We’ve trailed him a few times and still came up with nothing. It’s like he plucks them out of thin air.”

“So tie him up and hold him hostage,” Hansel suggested. “Make him tell you where they are.”

“And if he refused?” She added a final scoop of flour to the bowl. “We’d be no further ahead, and he would be mad as a hornet. I won’t risk his wrath. Not when people’s lives are at stake.”

“Is he truly that dangerous?”

Cork put his hands on his hips. “He ate the first gingerbread boy before we knew what he was doing. A *real* gingerbread boy.”

Hansel’s face paled.

“At least this way, we get one gingerbread person each day,” Evony said, “and Magnus doesn’t suspect what we’re doing. We only have three people left to go.”

“Does he have no weakness?”

“Cookies don’t do well in water,” Cork said.

“We already knew that from living with Juniper, but Magnus thought he was stronger. He defied my mother and went outside during a thunderstorm but didn’t make it five feet before heading back. It took her three days to patch up the skin that had washed off.”

“Would’ve loved to see that,” Cork muttered with a snort.

“He stays inside now when it rains.” She added sugar to the bowl. “Juniper might be some use if he were in his proper dragon form, but he would never take part in Magnus’s destruction. The dragon

tri-code won't allow it."

Cork threw up his hands. "Magnus is a cookie! How does the dragon tri-code apply?"

"Well, maybe if Magnus didn't walk and talk and eat, Juniper might see it differently," she said. "He can't do anything as a cookie himself, anyway."

"What are you making?" Cork asked, changing the subject.

She glanced at Hansel's dark hair and then spoke to Cork, trying not to feel self-conscious. "Molasses cookies."

He rubbed his hands together and then climbed over to the sink. "I'll put on the kettle."

By the time Broom swept into the room on his magpie, they had the molasses cookies packed in Magnus's basket—minus a few for themselves—along with a chocolate cake and the regular gingersnaps. Juniper swooped in close behind Broom's magpie carrying Gretel on his back. He flew straight to the top bunk and showed her his potpourri bed, continuing a conversation about the merits of dried versus fresh flower petals. He then gave a brief report of moving pebbles but seeing no sign of Magnus.

"Does that *thing* really think he caught me with his trail of rocks?" Hansel asked.

Broom snorted with amusement and repeated "that thing" under his breath. He removed the braided grass reins from the magpie and fished a gingersnap out of the basket as payment before shooing the bird away.

"He can believe what he wants," Evony said. "I have no interest in correcting him, and it wouldn't do any good, anyway."

Cork chuckled. "Not too bright, remember?"

"I WONDER IF THAT SPOON wand would work on me," Hansel mused later as they readied themselves for another visit by the gingerbread man.

Evony tucked the spoon into her bodice and laughed, nervous and absurdly giddy at the same time. "Perhaps we'll try it someday." The thought of waking up the next morning and seeing Hansel once again pleased her and frightened her all at once.

"I'm not sure I want to look like a blueberry pie, but it suits you." His gaze held both mirth and appreciation.

She rolled her eyes and pushed the chairs under the table as far as possible. The wand had dressed her in layers and layers of purple-blue skirts, which made walking around the kitchen a challenge. The bodice was the same color, overlayed in golden-brown ribbons like the crisscross pattern of a lattice pie crust, complete with a buttery sheen. Her hair had been swept up and adorned with too many large white chrysanthemums.

Cork pointed at her, laughing, and said, "Your head looks like the whipped—ah!"

Broom pushed him off the counter and then continued sweeping up as much of the orange pixie dust as he could, muttering about selling the stuff to the troll at the bridge someday. By the time he finished, there was so little left that Magnus would be hard pressed to see it even if he had an eagle's eyesight.

Cork climbed back onto the counter, and the two brownies took their places. While Gretel flew to the cellar through the chink in the floor, Evony settled Juniper and the cookies under his basket with an arrangement of hyssop on top.

Hansel approached Evony where she stood in front of the counter. She was afraid to move far in the heavy skirts.

“Will you be all right?” He spoke softly and took her hands. “Do you need anything?”

She needed for all of this to be over. “I’ll be fine.” The warmth of his hands made her realize how cold her own were. “Magnus hasn’t caught on yet to what we’re doing. Tonight shouldn’t be any different.”

“It’s not hard to fool a *cookie,*” Juniper said from his hiding spot.

“I’ll be ready if you need me.” Hansel cupped her face in his hand. He rearranged a chrysanthemum petal that had strayed too close to her ear.

If he didn’t go soon, she might break down and tell him just how much she needed him. Ever since Juniper had arrived, she’d never felt alone. He was her companion and that would never change. But she was learning that a human-dragon bond was not the same as that between a man and a woman.

“You should join Gretel now,” she whispered.

He obeyed, and the door softly thumped shut behind him.

Evony stood by herself in the cottage, knowing she wasn’t truly alone. Magnus’s whistling echoed outside the window. Everything was in order, except ... the chest!

She rushed over and pushed the chest on top of the cellar door, her skirts knocking over a chair in the process. She had no time to pick it up and hurried back to her place.

The calmness and reassurance she’d felt with Hansel a moment earlier disappeared. The door burst open, and Magnus entered wearing garish yellow and purple. He strode to the table immediately and set down his basket with such force that she flinched.

“Good evening, Magnus.” Hopefully addressing him by name right away might distract him from how flustered she was.

He approached without returning the greeting and sniffed the chrysanthemums in her hair. The scent seemed to please him. When he stepped back, however, he grimaced and exhaled quickly through his nose as if trying to dispel an unpleasant aroma. He leaned towards her and smelled her neck.

“Shall we begin?” She clasped her hands tightly at her waist and tried not to flinch away from him.

“Before I’ve guessed what treats you’ve made for me today?” He walked around the table, inspected the loft bed and the shelves, picked up the overturned chair, and then returned to stand in front of her. “I smell chocolate and molasses and cinnamon, fresh bread and ...” His brows furrowed as he stared at her, and his fists clenched at his sides.

She held her breath, wishing she could disappear like the brownies.

He spun on his heel and walked to the cellar door. “I want to see the human.”

Her heart skipped a beat, and she resisted the urge to throw herself on top of the chest. “That’s not a good idea. He could escape, and I still need to fatten him up for another day or two.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.” He easily shoved the chest to the side but kept his foot over the door. “Put your hand out just enough so I can see it, human, and don’t try anything stupid.”

At least he wasn’t asking to see Hansel face to face. Even with his poor eyesight, he’d have been able to tell Hansel wasn’t as thin as she’d led him to believe. There was a chance he could still figure it out, though.

Magnus lifted the cellar door a few inches. “Now, give me your hand.” He squinted, looking for movement.

Something that looked like a slim twig poked through the crack. Magnus grasped it with his free hand and felt it carefully. Evony covered her mouth with her knuckles, stifling a gasp and a giggle.

Gretel had glamoured a twig to look like a human finger, complete with joints and a fingernail, although the “skin” still looked like bark, a detail Magnus wouldn’t be able to notice.

He let go with a disgusted grunt and shoved the chest back over the door, barely giving Hansel time to pull the stick finger back through the opening.

“How old is it?” Magnus asked, wiping his hands on his trousers.

“I never asked his age.”

“You’d better feed it twice as much tomorrow.”

They completed the potion trial with a gingerbread girl, and everything went as expected, although the extra sparkle from stray pixie dust didn’t catch Magnus’s interest as it had before. He seemed distracted and grabbed his basket of sweets, leaving the box behind.

At the front door, he paused and spoke over his shoulder. “Fattened or not, tomorrow we’ll be testing the potion on a new cookie. I’ll be bringing none of my own.”

Chapter Eight

Evony stared at the closed door after Magnus left. If she'd understood him correctly, he expected to watch the human in the cellar become a gingerbread boy the next evening.

Hansel. A gingerbread boy.

That would *not* happen.

With a jolt, she realized that Juniper and Cork were arguing loudly, while Broom stood stone-still in the cupboard, hugging the gingerbread girl with a thunderous look on his face.

She tried to run her fingers through her hair, but they caught in the chrysanthemums, dislodging one to hang down by her ear. "Juniper?" She'd forgotten the countdown.

He quieted and looked around, realization dawning in his eyes that their routine had been interrupted. "Right. I'm going."

At least they had one more of the gingerbread people out of Magnus's hands. There were only two left to rescue, but they wouldn't get them tomorrow. She nestled the girl safely in her box and took her to the cellar, careful lest she trip on the absurd blueberry skirts. Gretel flew past her up the stairs and joined the brownies' heated discussion in the kitchen.

After locking the box away, Evony sat on a barrel and put her head in her hands. It had been a day of tears, but now they wouldn't come.

Something tugged gently at her hair.

"These can't be comfortable." Hansel's fingers moved slowly among her curls and the chrysanthemums, removing pins and letting the white flowers drift to the floor.

She felt lighter as her hair tumbled around her shoulders.

When the last petal fell, he put a hand on her back. "You look like you could use a hug. May I?"

She looked up at him. Surely he'd heard the whole exchange, yet here he was offering support to *her*. She stood and wrapped her arms around him, pleased with how her cheek nestled against his shoulder, and felt his arms pull her close. They stood that way long enough for the argument upstairs to turn to silence. When she spoke, she pulled away enough to be able to see his face, but she didn't let go.

"He expects to watch you turn into a cookie tomorrow. He's so impatient to become a human himself, I think having you around puts him on edge. You have to leave right away—it's the only way to keep you safe."

Hansel stroked her cheek with the back of his hand. "It's not the *only* way. You don't see it, do you?"

"See what?"

"You can tell Magnus I got free and ate the house sweets on my own. Bake a gingerbread cookie as you always do and present it to him tomorrow. He'll assume it's me."

Her jaw dropped, and a bubble of laughter escaped her. Could it work? "Do you think he would fall for it?"

"He'll never know the difference."

"I don't know." So many things could go wrong.

"I'm done being driven off," Hansel said. "I'm not going anywhere. And you're not alone anymore, Evony."

She liked how he said her name. Not possessively like Magnus, but tenderly, like ... like something she wanted to learn more about.

When they returned upstairs, Cork was running around with the twig finger, pointing with it and giving Broom and Gretel instructions for laying out the tea. Juniper flew back in the window and announced that Magnus was gone and had kicked pebbles left and right as he stormed through the lemon grove.

Cork poked Broom with the twig finger.

"Hey!" Broom lobbed a raisin at him but missed by two inches.

Evony set out the three remaining gingerbread cookies. "We won't be doing a switch tomorrow. The cookie we present will stand in for Hansel, and Magnus is free to eat the whole thing."

Pushing the jar of cream in place, Broom passed by Cork and got a pat on the back with the twig finger. He grumbled in response. Gretel took pity on him and made the twig finger sprout leaves and blossoms until it became too cumbersome to carry. Disappointed, Cork threw it to the side and sat down to join them for tea.

THE NEXT MORNING, EVONY walked hand in hand with Hansel through the lemon grove back to the cottage. He carried the basket, a large bundle of goldenrod tucked in between the eggs and radishes. The lantern illuminated the white pebbles at their feet, the stray ones scattered by Magnus glinting like stars among the shadowy grass.

They stepped into the clearing with the sunrise, and the amazement on Hansel's face mirrored her own. Soft brown ginger loaf studded with toasted walnuts formed the sides of the cottage, and a border of crushed molasses cookies circled the base. In this crumb garden, sparkling yellow and orange rock candy blossoms grew on delicate sugar-glass stems. Triple-sized sugar cookies tiled the roof, and onto each round shingle was pressed a delicate dried flower—pansies and lavender, dahlias and chamomile. A sheet of caramel brown peanut brittle stood in for a door, bordered by an orderly row of pastel-frosted tea cakes.

"Does this ever get old?" he asked in a hushed voice.

"Never." A pang of regret rippled through her. If all went well, this might be one of the last times she ever saw her home.

His fingers tightened around hers, and he breathed deeply, taking in the scents of the cottage as well as the sights.

She watched him enjoying the moment and smiled. As familiar and comfortable as the cottage was, there were much better things to move on to ... if all went well. That possibility was no closer now than when she'd first seen him as a cloaked stranger in the village.

Hansel offered to do the baking while she started on the potion. "I've seen—and eaten—what you can do," he said. "I feel the need to prove my own worth as a baker."

Juniper assisted Evony while Cork and Broom gave Hansel a hand in the kitchen, pointing out where to find ingredients and utensils. Gretel watched from the windowsill, plucking marigold petals the same orange as her hair and eating them one by one. Her dust drifted down to the counter, where Broom periodically swept it up and put it in a bottle.

The smell of gingerbread spices filled the air, and Evony was reminded of being a child with no cares in the world, when her mother's baking would envelop the house with warm, comforting scents. Blackberry and lavender joined the mix as Hansel pulled scones from the oven, and Evony's stomach rumbled in anticipation of new treats.

It was almost time to add the goldenrod to the potion. She double-checked all her measurements and then began crushing the petals as everyone else sat down for breakfast. Broom was sweeping pixie dust again.

"You're not really hoping to sell that dust to the troll at the bridge, are you?" she asked.

"Of course." He scooped a handful into the bottle and then wiped his hands on his tunic, leaving a sparkly orange smear. "My magpie can get me there fast enough. I want to contribute something to your new life when all this is over."

She was touched by his thoughtfulness. He must have noticed the golden cauldron was giving nothing but coppers lately. "That's sweet of you. Maybe you should ask Gretel for her permission before you sell it, though. It's her dust."

Gretel plucked another marigold petal and said absently, "Do what you like. I've no use for it. And it's glitter."

Evony's hands slipped and the mortar tipped over, spilling the crushed goldenrod. "It's ... what?"

"It's not pixie dust. It's pixie *glitter*. 'Dust' makes it sound dirty."

"Hey, if the shoe fits." Cork helped himself to the corner of a blackberry scone.

Evony's head reeled. *Goat cheese, golden larch, garlic.* She scooped the petals back into the mortar. *Gladiolus, geraniums, gelatin.* She needed to add the final ingredient to the potion. *Goldenrod.* Her hands shook, and she knocked the pestle onto the floor.

Pixies never came close to the cottage.

She picked up the pestle and laid it on the kitchen table, bracing her hands on the surface and staring at a mug of steaming tea.

Hansel pulled out her chair and guided her into it. "Are you all right?"

She sat down hard and then bolted back to her feet and turned in a circle, looking for something.

The missing ingredient. *Goldenrod* ...

Juniper landed on her shoulder and patted her cheek. "What are you thinking?" he whispered. When she didn't answer, he told her to take a deep breath.

She tried, but she took too many too fast and ended up dizzy.

She needed the missing ingredient, but it wasn't goldenrod. During Hansel and Gretel's first night in the cottage, the white cloud had sparkled with only a few specks of pixie dust in it.

Not pixie dust. "Glitter," she squeaked out, barely audible to herself.

What would happen if she added it correctly to the potion?

"Glitter?" Momentarily confused, Juniper caught on within seconds. He zipped around the room with a crow of triumph. "Glitter! GLITTER! Quick, give Evony all the glitter you've collected," he ordered Broom. He tried to gather more himself, but he ended up fanning it around and scattering it.

Evony scooped him out of the air, and in calming him down, was able to get herself under control enough to think clearly again.

"What's going on?" Cork yelled.

She spoke faster than she meant to, wringing her hands as Juniper clung to her wrist. "The secret ingredient. It's glitter. Pixie glitter. It has to be. I've never seen it before. I've never seen a pixie until I met Gretel. I didn't know ... I didn't know it was called glitter. I've always called it pixie dust, when I've thought of it at all, and my mother never corrected me." But her mother had known what it was all along.

"Then there's no time to waste." Hansel stood in front of her and gripped her shoulders, looking into her eyes. "You can do this."

She nodded, the confidence in his voice bolstering her determination. Broom brought her an impressive amount of glitter in the bottle, and she took it to the worktable with Juniper still on her arm. He jumped off and then sat nearby, back straight and tail wrapped tightly around his feet. His future depended on this.

With shaking hands, Evony measured the pixie glitter carefully and then stoppered the bottle and tucked it into her apron. Pixie glitter came in as many colors as pixies themselves, but the instructions only specified the color of the resulting potion. Hopefully that didn't mean she needed purple glitter. She sensed everyone's gaze on her as she held the final ingredient over the boiling cauldron. Broom kept flickering in and out of sight on the top bunk as he held his breath in anticipation.

As soon as the glitter hit the liquid, orange and purple sparks burst into the air and then disappeared just as quickly. Two breaths later, the potion settled into the deep purple described in the book—they hadn't even had to wait until it cured. After the potion bubbled for the required minutes, she removed the cauldron from the stand, secured the lid on top, and set it to the side. Juniper blew out the candle.

Cork and Broom approached and stood on either side of Juniper. Hansel put an arm around Evony's waist and motioned for Gretel to stay in the window. They didn't dare get extra glitter near the mixture.

"Is that it?" Cork asked.

The seed of hope blossomed in Evony's chest. "It has to be." She clapped her hands together, startling everyone and pulling their gaze away from the potion. "Now we need to get ready for Magnus's visit tonight."

After breakfast, Hansel decorated the two gingerbread boys, both of them decent replicas of Evony's cookies, thanks to guidance from Cork and Broom. Cork complained about being short a couple of gingerbread to eat at the end of the day until Hansel promised to set aside a chocolate hazelnut hand pie for him. The brownies stuck by his side to see how these new treats were made.

Gretel flew outside to keep everything as clean as possible in the cottage. Evony and Juniper joined her, and Evony brought along the spade to unearth the bits of gingerbread and other sweets they had buried days ago.

Juniper reached the spot first. "Something's dug it up!"

"What?" Evony ran to catch up and then stopped short at the empty hole in the ground. "Did it disappear?"

"No, look!" Gretel pointed to crumbs strewn about with the clods of dirt. "And there are footprints. Fresh ones."

Evony turned in circles, looking for the bandit. Had the creature been turned into a cookie and then been eaten by something else?

Juniper flew high above the clearing. After a few minutes, he landed on Evony's shoulder and whispered. "Don't move, but look to your left just between the birch trees near that clump of ferns."

She did as instructed, and right away she saw the fox with the mulberry-red coat sitting in profile in a patch of sunlight. He was licking his lips and looking at the ground in front of his feet. A second later, he picked something up and gulped it down.

"It's one of the custard cream cookies!" Juniper whispered.

"Are you sure?" His eyesight was far superior, but Evony had trouble believing the fox was still very much a fox after eating the magical sweet. Apparently, he hadn't felt the need to wait for her to put out an offering of safe sweets.

"It looks as if he's eaten the whole lot."

Gretel perched on Evony's other shoulder. "How can that be?"

She shook her head but hazarded a few guesses. "Maybe being buried changed it back into regular food, or being separated from the cottage and the ward, or being left out overnight. Or maybe all three. Who knows for sure?"

"Does that mean you've found a way to break the spell on the cottage?" Gretel asked.

Evony smiled and watched the fox trot away, completely unharmed. "We won't know for sure until we've buried the whole thing, I suspect, and we can't try that until we've taken care of other business. But it's a place to start."

She returned to the cottage and shared the news, her heart lighter than it had been in months.

After the potion had cured for the required time, a couple of hours before Magnus was due to arrive, everyone gathered in the kitchen. Juniper flew in with Gretel on his back and settled her in his basket of potpourri.

Evony selected one of the gingerbread boxes from the locked cabinet and laid it on the counter next to the cauldron.

"Do you know who that was?" Hansel asked.

She removed the lid. "If I'm not mistaken, he was the last to stumble upon the candy cottage a couple of years ago, a young man about my age." Or so her mother had said. Evony had never seen any of the people herself before their transformation, and the people themselves had never seen her or her mother. She'd chosen the young man with the hope that he would be the strongest and most likely to run when she gave the word. "Do you have the waterskin and the bag of food ready for him?"

"Right here." Hansel patted the bundle behind him on the table.

"What if this doesn't work?" she whispered.

"It will."

No one else spoke, but she could feel their nervousness. She laid the gingerbread boy on the counter, measured out one third of the potion, and poured it onto him, careful not to waste even a single drop.

Smoke filled the room, but this time it was deep purple, like the potion itself. Rather than wafting around the room and slowly dissipating like a cloud, it lingered for a few moments and then disappeared into thin air.

The gingerbread boy was gone.

Chapter Nine

Evony gasped. In the exact spot where the gingerbread cookie had rested a moment before sat a young man staring at them in confusion. He jumped to the floor and backed into the corner by the bed, rubbing his eyes.

The potion had worked!

Hansel stood in front of the door, and Evony stepped behind him. No need to overwhelm the man with strangers.

Hansel spoke slowly and softly so as not to startle him. “I’m not sure how much you remember about what happened to you. You’re safe now, but you need to leave here right away and never return. Here’s food and water. I made the bread myself.” He held out the bag and offered a reassuring smile. “Go north as quickly as you can. Do you understand?”

The man snatched the bag and nodded, his bottom lip quivering.

Hansel opened the door and stepped aside, and Evony shifted to stay hidden behind him.

The man ran outside, and Juniper glided after him. The dragon would follow for a short distance to make sure he didn’t get lost or have any unexpected after-effects from the potion.

Evony looked at Hansel and then laughed like a giddy child. Cork and Broom danced a jig on the bottom bunk until they got tangled in the blanket and fell into a giggling heap. Gretel shot into the air so fast she bumped her head on the ceiling and created a small shower of glitter over Juniper’s basket. She dropped back down quickly.

Evony sobered a little. Magnus would arrive shortly, and they needed to get things ready for his visit.

Hansel looked at the cauldron. “How many people will that potion transform?”

“Two more.”

Cork jumped up and down. “Let’s do them now!”

Broom pushed him off the bed. “We can’t, you ninny! The last thing we need is a bunch of humans running around the forest when that fiend will be coming here soon.”

“I’ll bottle it like any other potion,” Evony said. “It only needs to stay in the cauldron to cure. We’ll use it after we have all the gingerbread people safely away from Magnus.” She forced down her excitement so she could focus. Now was not the time for careless mistakes. She needed enough potion for six more people, plus Juniper. That would take two more batches.

Cork must have been thinking the same thing. “Quick! Make more potion!”

“But it’s so late ...” She’d never made more than one batch in a day. Besides, they were still missing two of the gingerbread people.

“You have time to make it before Magnus arrives,” Hansel said. He handed her a couple of empty bottles from the worktable. “We’ll get everything ready and then stay up with you until it’s cured.”

She bottled the remaining potion and tucked the vials into her apron next to the spoon wand and the bottle of glitter.

Hansel continued. “You can make the final batch in the morning, and then you’ll have enough for everyone by noon tomorrow.”

Everything was happening so fast, but there was no time for hesitation and no time to waste. She had more than enough glitter and set to work while Hansel and the brownies busied themselves in the

kitchen.

Juniper returned and gave a report of the young man's progress. "He's got his bearings, but he's wobbly and weak. Still, he seems determined to get away. I wonder, though, if the people who have been cookies longer will have a harder time adjusting." His brow furrowed in concern, and for good reason. He'd been among the first to experience the transformation over six years ago.

Sooner than expected, Evony had the second successful batch of potion safely stored in the cauldron. Juniper announced the gingerbread man's approach, and everyone took their places. Hansel and Gretel hid in the barn in case Magnus decided to look in the cellar. He never went in the barn. The animals found his scent fascinating, and their attention terrified him.

Juniper hid under the basket with the extra gingerbread boy, just for the routine of it. Cork and Broom hopped into the cupboard to be close, even though they would have no job this time. Evony set out the "Hansel" cookie next to a bottle of yesterday's leftover potion and placed the basket of sweets on the table.

"Your dress!" Juniper said.

She really didn't feel like playing dress up for Magnus tonight, but she couldn't risk making him suspicious. After placing the two potions among the others on the shelf, essentially hiding them in plain sight, she used the spoon wand to change and then tucked it into her bodice. Did princesses never wear aprons?

Juniper snorted. "You look like you've skinned a gingerbread man. Fitting."

She glanced at the gown and grimaced. A warm gingerbread-brown overdress sparkled with white gems so tiny they looked like a dusting of sugar, and split skirts revealed an underdress thickly ruffled with candy-pink silk petals. Wide bands of white embroidery spiraled her waist and wrists and traced along the modest neckline the same way frosting would decorate a cookie. Her hair hung loose, with a delicate crystal crown nestled on top.

She truly was a queen tonight. A gingerbread queen. Her childhood self would have been delighted at the ensemble, but now she wanted nothing more than to throw everything into the fire.

The room grew still and quiet. Evony rehearsed her story about the stranger's escape and his sampling of the cottage sweets. Soon, Magnus's boots could be heard crunching on the pebble path just outside. He paused on the other side of the door.

What was he waiting for?

Bam!

The door slammed into the wall, and Magnus stepped into the room carrying his basket. Inside sat a box like the one he'd left behind the night before. Why would he bring that? Was he planning to take the new cookie home with him?

Time for her speech. "I'm sorry to disappoint you, Magnus, but you won't be able to watch—"

"Not a word." His tone left no room for argument. With barely a glance in her direction, he set the basket on the table and then yanked open the cellar door. He peered inside, but it was too dark to see anything.

"Bring me a light."

As Evony handed him the lantern, silver buttons winked at her from the front of his butter yellow tunic.

He crouched and lowered the lantern as far as he could into the darkness. Hansel's blankets had all been folded and Juniper's pillow returned to the bunk. The cauldron was locked away in the cabinet. There was nothing to see. He slammed the door closed and shoved the lantern back into her hands.

She set the lantern on the counter, and when she turned back around, he was staring at her. Frustration and anger clouded his features, but a hint of amusement lit his eyes. He touched the crown on her head lightly and a smile appeared briefly at the corner of his lips. Seconds later, he caught sight of the cookie on the counter behind her and grew serious.

"I refuse to watch your enjoyment of someone's misfortune," Evony said, although they weren't the words she'd practiced. "He's already eaten the cursed sweets."

White eyebrows arched over a piercing stare. "You surprise me." Magnus approached the cookie and leaned in for a closer look. "So, this is the stranger? It is rather skinny, isn't it?" He picked it up and held it out in front of him.

Evony bit a nail. Even knowing the cookie was just a cookie, her stomach flipped. Magnus's routine was all wrong.

He looked her in the eyes for a long moment. "You might not want to watch this." Finally, he dropped the cookie on the floor and stomped on it, grinding it into the wooden planks.

Juniper gasped, and Evony quickly hid it with one of her own. "What did you do? I didn't have a chance to try—"

Magnus turned on his heel, grabbed the box from the basket, and pushed it into Evony's hands. "We don't need him. These are the last two of your mother's creations. Show me how the potion works."

Evony broke out in a sweat and her hands went cold. How had he found out? Or was he guessing? "What ... what do you mean?"

"Don't toy with me. I've been patient, but the witch made me a promise, and now you're finally going to fulfill it. You found the potion."

She tucked the box behind her on the counter and bit her lip. If he really knew the truth, he would search for the potion no matter what she did. The two bottles sat tucked away on the shelf, and they looked like any other potion. She'd been too nervous to keep them with the cauldron, mindful of the saying about not putting all your eggs in one basket.

If she did as he said, she could save one of the gingerbread people. But if he saw the bottle of potion, he might recognize the other and claim it for his own. And he might decide to destroy the second gingerbread person like he did Hansel's cookie, simply because it would be "no longer needed."

She needed to use both potions at once without letting him know. And to do that, she needed to assume he knew the truth. If he'd been out scattering his pebble trail again, he might have seen the man who'd escaped.

Standing straight and looking into his blackberry eyes, she said, "What did you do to the man?"

A sly smile spread across his face. "Ah ... so you did find it. I'm exceedingly pleased. I'd been debating whether the man I saw staggering through the forest was your stranger or one of the cookies. He looked half starved, so it could have gone either way."

Evony wrapped her arms around her middle, suddenly sick to her stomach. He hadn't known for sure. He'd tricked her into telling him.

"So sorry you can't use the potion on your new pet." He glanced at the crumbs on the floor. "You'd hoped to demonstrate on him, I suppose?"

He still believed he'd crushed Hansel into dust, which meant Hansel was safe for the time being. "What did you to do the other man?" she said through clenched teeth.

He looked offended that she would accuse him of wrongdoing. "Nothing. I have no need for him. Let him go tell his stories." He paused and wrung his hands. "I want to see it work for myself. *Now.*"

Her mind still reeling, Evony placed the two gingerbread people on the counter, one boy and one girl. She reluctantly fetched the two real potions, hiding one in her left hand at her side while holding the other out in front of her, drawing Magnus's gaze.

He looked at it greedily and hovered over her shoulder as she sat it on the counter.

"You're going to want to stand back." She left no room for argument in her tone, pushing aside her shock in order to do her job. She placed herself between him and the door, forcing him to take several steps back towards the bunk bed.

Taking a breath to steady herself, she uncorked the first bottle and poured it over the gingerbread boy. The moment the purple smoke clouded the air, she poured the second bottle over the gingerbread girl. The whole cottage was enveloped with a double-thick, stifling purple cloud. While Magnus coughed in the corner, Evony flipped over Juniper's basket and felt him latch onto her wrist, anticipating her next move. She grabbed the two humans by the arm and pulled them off the counter and out the door quickly. The smoke wouldn't last long.

The humans were wobbly and disoriented ... and white-haired. They would need help. "Juniper, get Hansel and get these people as far away from here as you can." She turned to the people. "Follow this dragon. Your life depends on it."

Without waiting to see if they obeyed, she turned and reentered the cottage.

Chapter Ten

As soon as Evony stepped over the threshold and back into the purple smoke, she slammed into Magnus, who was making his way out. Instinctively, she grabbed his arms to steady herself and then tried to steer him back inside. He was too strong, but she managed to spin him away from the door long enough to give Juniper a chance to get the old couple hidden under the canopy of the lemon trees.

"Enough!" Magnus brushed her hands away, grabbed her by the arm, and strode outside.

Evony lurched beside him, relieved to see that they were alone. The purple smoke had followed them out, and it wrapped around them like a grounded thundercloud before disappearing completely.

"It worked, didn't it?" Excitement and anger mingled in his voice, and he scanned the clearing for movement. The twilight hid details from his weak eyes.

"Of course it did."

He leaned close to watch her expression as he spoke, looking frighteningly triumphant. "I'll overlook your little stunt if you fetch me some of the potion right now. There's no need for us to wait any longer."

She nearly gagged on the strong burnt cookie smell of his breath and turned her face away. "I have to make more, and it can't be ready before tomorrow." She didn't dare mention the potion in the basement, which wasn't yet done curing. She couldn't start another until that one was finished.

His grip on her arm tightened painfully. "You did that on purpose! You had enough for me, and you wasted it!"

"Saving a human life is never a waste! It's *precisely* because of your attitude that I used it on them first. They've been trapped for years!" She'd never spoken to him so boldly, but he had no more prisoners as leverage to keep her silent.

"I've been trapped my whole life!"

"You've never been trapped. You've only ever been who you are now."

"Exactly!" He wrenched her arm, and she winced. "I'm not supposed to be this. I'm supposed to be like them. Like you! We're supposed to be together!"

"Why? Because my mother said so? Can you not make up your own mind about who you want to be?"

His eyes narrowed. Her words had not affected him. His single-minded purpose hadn't changed. Perhaps it never could. He spoke slowly, his voice deep and menacing. "I *will* be human. I *will* be your husband. You *will* be my queen." His grip tightened even more. "The witch promised."

Evony pushed down her pain and anger. It would get her nowhere. At least she could buy time for Juniper and Hansel to get the old couple away. She hoped Hansel and Gretel would stay with them and get to safety, too.

"What's done is done," she said. "Your temper won't get the potion made any quicker. Neither will holding me here." She indicated the arm he was still squeezing.

He looked at his hand as if unaware of what he'd been doing. With a frown, he let go. A bruise was already forming, and he tried to wipe it away as if it were a smudge on her arm, his gingerbread fingers rasping unpleasantly against her skin.

“Come back tomorrow evening, and I’ll have the potion finished.” She would also have the remaining gingerbread people—and Juniper—back to normal and be long gone.

He scoffed. “I’m not going anywhere. I won’t risk having you run away like the others. I will not be left behind.”

She couldn’t make the potion with him looking over her shoulder. He would never let her use it on anyone else. She bit her lip, wishing selfishly that Hansel would return with Juniper. She could use his strength by her side.

Turning her back to Magnus, she used the spoon wand to change back into her sky blue dress and grey apron and then walked inside. She put the spoon away in the cupboard, hoping to catch a glimpse of the brownies, but if they were there, she couldn’t see them.

Magnus followed her and closed the door firmly behind him. While she busied herself making tea and laying out the sweets from the basket, he walked circles around the room, stopping often at the worktable to inspect the bottles and packets of ingredients. Cork and Broom revealed themselves a couple of times to her, and she felt comforted to know they were still with her. She wished she could explain what was going on.

Wondering when Juniper would return, she sliced some of Hansel’s bread, smeared it with goat cheese, and arranged it on a plate.

Magnus interrupted her from behind, placing his cheek right beside hers as he spoke. “What are you doing?”

She jumped, irritated that he’d caught her off guard. “It’s going to be a long night. Eat if you want, but have a seat somewhere. I won’t have you constantly looking over my shoulder.”

“And why not?” he whispered in her ear. “Do I make you nervous?”

She turned to face him, stepping to the side to put some space between them, and crossed her arms. “Nervous? No. But I’m running low on a few unique items to make your potion. One slip of the hand, and your chance of becoming human will be gone forever, simply because you couldn’t park your carcass and stay out of my way. I’m not your queen, and this isn’t your castle.”

He stepped back, towering over her, but a look of shock passed over his face as quick as a thought. For once, he had no comeback.

Evony realized that *he* was nervous. His goal was closer than ever, but he still couldn’t yet reach out and take it.

Turning his back to her, he said, “It’s late. Wake me in the morning.” He grabbed her pillow and then settled on the floor with his back against the door. “But keep in mind that I’m a light sleeper.”

He didn’t fall asleep right away but watched her through half-closed lids. Moving quietly in hopes that he would doze off soon, Evony placed a small iron cauldron on the stand and lit the candle beneath it. She gathered ingredients for a foul-smelling herbal tea and dumped them in one at a time. It wasn’t the potion, but he didn’t know that. By the time the cauldron was simmering, his eyes were closed.

She’d spoken the truth about it being a long night and allowed herself to brew a precious pot of coffee to help stay awake. Before putting away the beans, she slid two over to the side near Cork and Broom’s cupboard, unsure if they were still around.

About an hour before the real potion was ready, Juniper showed up at the window behind the counter. Evony saw the movement right away and rushed over, motioning for him to stay put. He clung to the windowsill and peeked inside with a questioning look.

Magnus twitched in his sleep. He’d slipped down until he lay flat on his back, his breathing so shallow she could hardly see his chest rise and fall.

“He’s still here,” she whispered as she sliced a piece of bread into small squares in order to look busy. Just in case.

“Hansel and Gretel are helping the humans,” Juniper said. “They’re a couple of the first to be transformed into gingerbread, and they’re having trouble adjusting, just as I feared. The man could hardly walk on his own when I left.”

She had to lean forward to hear him.

“It looks like your dream of flying away on dragon back might be impossible, if I end up as weak as that.” He eyed the bread hungrily.

“We’ll worry about that when the time comes.” Which might be sooner than they’d thought. “Make sure Hansel and Gretel stay in the barn when they return.” If they returned. She wrapped the bread cubes in a cloth, and Juniper flew off with the bundle.

An hour before midnight, Evony descended the cellar stairs with three small glass bottles in hand, filled them with equal amounts of the cured potion, and locked them safely in the cabinet with the remaining four gingerbread people.

Back upstairs, Magnus had rolled onto his side facing the wall. When the cellar door bumped shut, he bolted into a sitting position with his eyes closed. Evony hid the golden cauldron behind her back and then held her breath until he finally dropped back onto the floor. With a sigh of relief, she resumed working. She scrubbed the golden cauldron and readied it for the final batch of potion, thankful Broom had bottled the pixie dust for her. She needed to use it before it disappeared.

She hadn’t seen any more sign of the brownies, but the coffee beans were gone.

After successfully brewing another deep purple potion, she stored the golden cauldron downstairs, placed the iron one back over the candle, and then poured herself another cup of coffee. She could get used to the stuff, especially paired with a sweet or two. Eventually, she dozed off with her head on the table.

Weak sunlight lit the room when Evony awoke. She yawned and kindled the fire, setting the leftover coffee on the stove to reheat. Shivering, she rubbed her arms and then flinched when she touched the bruise Magnus had caused.

Magnus lay on his stomach, snoring into her pillow. She would need to burn it when this was all over. For a brief moment, she wondered how easy it would be to overpower him while he slept. She’d never seen him look so vulnerable, and this might be the only time she had such an advantage over him.

She took a deep breath and rejected the impulse. What would Juniper think of her? Magnus might not be human, but having been created by a witch, he was as much a creature of magic as dragons and pixies and unicorns. Whatever solution they found for him would not involve turning herself or her friends into killers like him.

Evony gathered three more glass bottles. She had no way of knowing if Hansel had returned, short of leaving the cottage, but she wouldn’t risk waking Magnus just yet by sneaking out. She felt as if she stood on the edge of a cliff and one wrong move could send her plummeting over the side. She needed to find a way to change the gingerbread people back into themselves *and* get herself and her friends safely away from Magnus. She wouldn’t risk transporting the people in their delicate cookie forms. Juniper probably wouldn’t be as much help as they’d hoped, but after observing how the others had reacted to the potion, she had an inkling of a plan.

She filled a pitcher with water, grabbed four cups, and then made her way down the steep cellar stairs and closed the door silently behind her. Working by candlelight, she carefully packed her

mother's clay jars in layers of straw inside a deep basket. She would have to add the spoon wand later, but she wanted to be ready to leave at a moment's notice.

Next, she poured the final batch of potion into three bottles and laid out one of the previous night's bottles next to them. She wiped the golden cauldron clean, carefully wrapped the other two potions in soft cloth, and stored them inside with the the cork lid tightly secured. The bundle went into her apron pocket—one potion for Juniper, and one extra that should have been for the first cookie person Magnus ate before they'd figured out how to trick him. She couldn't let him get his hands on either of the bottles.

She laid out some food from the storage barrels and then unwrapped the last four gingerbread people and placed them on the floor. They would be human again, no matter what. Once they were all human, Magnus could no longer use them to threaten her.

But first, she would have to get them away from the cottage.

She pushed a wad of fabric into the chink in the floorboard above and then sat in front of the cookies with the four bottles in her lap, her plan still forming even as she worked. She opened the bottles and poured them quickly one by one on the gingerbread. Purple smoke clogged the room, and she shushed the people even before they made a sound.

"I know you're frightened, but I need you to stay silent," she said firmly. "I'm here to help you." She spoke softly of the sunny autumn day they would see outside soon, until the purple haze finally disappeared.

Two men and two women blinked at her in the candlelight, frightened and shivering. They didn't seem to recognize each other, but they huddled together. Thankfully, none of them seemed inclined to bolt like the first man had.

"Please rest and get your strength back while you can. I have to leave for a few minutes, but my dragon companion will return shortly to get you. Until then, you *must* stay completely silent. If not, you could be trapped again ... or worse." She didn't want to frighten them any more than they were, but she *needed* to in order to keep them safe.

One of the women whispered, "Who are you?"

"A friend." She didn't dare mention her relationship to the witch they may or may not have heard about in the village. "I don't have time to explain more. There's someone upstairs who could still do you harm, which is why you have to be quiet."

The other woman hid her face in her hands.

"Once I get him out of the house," she continued, "you can leave, but not until my dragon tells you."

The woman peeked through her fingers, hopeful. They all seemed encouraged that a dragon was involved, and Evony didn't have the heart to tell them he was a cookie. Juniper could explain that himself once Magnus was out of the way.

She stood and gestured to the food. "Please eat and drink. We'll have you out of here soon."

One of the men started eating hungrily, and the woman who had spoken poured water into the cups. The other man's eyes blinked heavily as if he might fall asleep any second.

Evony had to trust them to take care of each other. She tiptoed back upstairs with the basket of jars, which she stored in the shadows under the counter.

Glancing over her shoulder at Magnus's sleeping form, she climbed onto the counter and slipped out the window, on edge lest he awaken before she made it to the barn. If Hansel wasn't back, she would have to move forward with her plan on her own. Magnus would be looking for the potion, and she couldn't put him off forever. She needed a distraction to get him away from the cottage so Juniper

could get the people moving. After that ... she wasn't sure what to do, but at least the people would be safe.

She ran on the grass beside the pebble path, not bothering to look behind her. It was the first time since she'd been a child that she hadn't greeted her home in the morning.

Home. That was it. She would distract Magnus by asking him to show her his "castle," something to pass the time while "waiting for his potion to cure." He didn't need to know it was already finished and not intended for him. Juniper could escort the people to safety while they were away.

"Juniper!" she whispered loudly. "Juniper!"

He appeared within seconds and glided beside her, weaving among the lemon trees. "I saw you leave the cottage and stayed behind to keep watch. I don't think the fiend saw you leave. Oh, and Hansel and Gretel are back."

They said no more as they raced to the barn.

The nanny goat lifted her head from the weeds at the corner as they approached, and the donkey brayed a welcome. Out of breath, Evony slowed and patted them as she passed. Hansel waited for them just inside, a candle illuminating his tired eyes. Without thinking, she ran into his arms, and he hugged her tightly.

"Are the people safe?" she mumbled into his shoulder.

"They're on their way, but they're not traveling too quickly. Juniper told us what happened."

Gretel spoke from a rafter, her glitter drifting down and causing the candle to spark. "I made Hansel take a nap when we got back, but he's been pacing most of the night."

Evony needed to catch them up on what she'd done. They didn't yet know about the people downstairs. She pulled away from Hansel and said, "Magnus refuses to leave, so I ..." She stopped at the sudden flash of anger on his face.

He was staring at her arm where Magnus's bruise had darkened her skin. A determined glint entered his eyes. "Refuses to leave, does he? We'll see about that." He stormed from the barn.

Alarmed, Evony followed. If he hadn't been so weary, she wouldn't have been able to keep up with him. "Where are you going? He'll see you!"

If he hadn't been so weary, he might have stopped to listen to her.

"Oh, I fully intend for him to see me. I won't let him hurt you or anyone else anymore. Who does he think he is?"

She grabbed his arm and pleaded with Gretel to do something.

"Don't be foolish, Hans!" Gretel flew circles around his head. "He's ten times stronger than you!"

Hansel swatted away Gretel and shrugged off Evony's hand, and then he sped up, outpacing them both in a heartbeat.

Evony took a shortcut away from the pebble path and arrived at the cottage just as Hansel stepped inside. Magnus must have woken and moved away from the door. He would be wondering where she was, but had he found the people in the cellar? She stopped just outside the open door, panting, and wiped sweat from her brow.

Magnus stood by the worktable, a wide-eyed, disbelieving look on his face as he stared at Hansel standing before him, and no wonder. As far as he knew, he'd ground him into the floorboards the day before.

Hansel stepped to the stove, grabbed the pot of steaming coffee, and flung it at the gingerbread man's face.

Magnus howled in anger and perhaps pain. Brown liquid dripped from his clothes and puddled at his feet, while steam rose from his shoulders. A few crumbs flaked from his cheek, but he remained

intact.

Juniper flew in through the window and zipped around the room, with Gretel right behind him trailing an unusually dense cloud of orange glitter.

Hansel threw himself at Magnus, trying to wrestle him to the ground. Magnus countered with a punch to the jaw, and Hansel reeled backward, knocking over a chair.

“Stop!” Evony yelled.

Gretel yanked a strand of Magnus’s white hair, throwing him off balance. He plucked her from the air and threw her against the wall.

“Juniper, help—” Evony couldn’t reach Gretel with the struggling pair in her path.

“I’ve got her!” Juniper dove down, scooped up his tiny friend, and rushed out the window.

Hansel landed a blow and sent Magnus crashing into the worktable. Glass vials and ceramic pots shattered, and oily black smoke oozed from the surface as their contents mingled.

Evony’s mother had warned her never to mix potions blindly.

Fat sparks erupted from the mess and zinged around the room like mad fireflies. One of them whizzed past the candle and kindled the wick. Another landed in Juniper’s basket and crackled among the potpourri.

Enraged to see his potion in danger, Magnus roared and slammed Hansel to the ground so hard there was no chance of him getting up again. He grabbed some twine from the worktable, knocking the spitting candle to the floor, and then bound Hansel’s hands.

A spark zipped past Evony’s head and out the door. She ducked another one, which landed on her cloak hanging on the wall and smoldered.

Magnus dragged Hansel to his feet.

“Stop!” Evony squared herself in the doorway, but he pushed her to the floor and stepped over her as he marched his prisoner outside.

Hansel wheezed in pain and tried not to clip her with his boots.

Evony crawled out behind them, keeping low to avoid the thickening hail of embers from the worktable. As soon as she cleared the threshold, she stood and faced the furious gingerbread man.

Magnus held the struggling Hansel easily and turned him to face the candy cottage. He forced him to his knees and broke off a piece of fruitcake siding. Holding it under Hansel’s nose, he said, “If you want to ensure no harm comes to your little sugar plum, you’ll eat it this time.”

“No!” Evony yelled.

Magnus turned his face towards her, his eyes red with hatred and anger. She bit her lip and stood perfectly still, lest he do worse than make Hansel eat the cursed sweets.

Hansel looked at Evony and mouthed, “I’m sorry.”

She wiped a tear from her cheek, keeping her gaze steady as he opened his mouth to accept a bite of the offered cake.

Purple smoke seeped from the crumbs left in Magnus’s hand, swirling around both him and Hansel.

Something cracked inside the house, and Evony jumped to the side in alarm. Sparks pinged off the door frame and joined the dizzying purple cloud, spinning in circles until they disappeared with a sizzle and pop. Her eyes watered and she wiped them with the back of her hand. When she could see clearly again, the smoke had cleared.

She blinked in disbelief. Hansel stood before her very much alive and looking around him in confusion ... but he was the size of a gingerbread cookie.

Chapter Eleven

Before Evony had time to grapple with the fact that Hansel had become a living gingerbread cookie like Juniper, he disappeared.

She gasped, alarmed until she heard a faint grunt and rustle in the bushes. Cork and Broom were back—if they'd ever gone anywhere to start with. They'd saved him!

Magnus whipped around in a circle, searching the ground for a cookie that should have been lying at his feet. "What did you do with him?"

"Nothing," she said. "I have no magic." But Gretel did, and Hansel was always covered in her glitter. Somehow it had kept him alive. And the brownies had shared their invisibility with him and taken him to safety.

He looked at her suspiciously. "Never mind. We don't need him. He's finally gone, no thanks to you."

Thick black smoke glinting with eerie silver lights wafted out the window, clinging low to the ground. Evony chewed a nail and fought the urge to glance in the direction of the cellar or the bushes.

"Now that all of the distractions are out of the way, you can finally focus your energy where it belongs." His voice lowered. "You need to get my potion ready *now*."

Had he even noticed what was going on inside the cottage? She needed to find Juniper and get the people out of the cellar, but she couldn't do that with Magnus lurking around. Asking him for a stroll was no longer an option, so she did what her instincts told her. She ran, hoping he would follow. The cauldron bumped against her knee, and she hitched up her apron to keep it safe. She'd gone barely a dozen yards when sounds like small thunderclaps stopped her cold.

Bang! Pop!

Candy-glass splintered and flew into the sky, and smoke erupted from the chimney like steam from the spout of a boiling teakettle. When she glanced back, Magnus stood frozen, staring at the charred sweets and shattered candies around the window.

Evony's only thought was that she had never been able to get it to burn like that.

"Don't stop!" Juniper flew at her from the lemon grove.

Gretel also appeared and hovered over Evony's head, facing the cottage. "Hit the ground!"

"We've got to get out of here!" Juniper said.

"Now!" Gretel yelled.

Evony dropped to her knees and doubled over, cradling the cauldron and shielding her head with her hands. Juniper huddled at her side, curling himself into a tight ball.

Crack! Bang!

The cottage exploded with ear-splitting pops and whistles. A wave of jewel-toned smoke and rainbow ashes washed over them. They remained untouched, safe underneath a bubble created by Gretel, who strained to maintain the shelter. As soon as the wave passed, the bubble popped and Gretel flew head over heels into the grass. A final gust of hot air and sugary dust whooshed by.

Working to slow her breath, Evony kept her head down for a moment. Cork and Broom were resourceful—they would have gotten themselves and Hansel to safety—but there were four people trapped in the cellar. She had to get to them.

She sat up, and her jaw dropped.

Seeing the look on her face, Juniper glanced around, and his eyes widened. “What ... happened?”

Gretel echoed his question in a whisper.

The whole forest, as far as the eye could see, had transformed into a candy wonderland. The trees, the grass, even the barn in the distance. The cottage still stood, but it was nothing more than blackened fruitcake siding with a sagging peppermint roof.

A teal-feathered chicken scurried by chasing a butterscotch beetle. It swallowed the bug in one gulp and then ran across the clearing.

Juniper flew over to check on Magnus, who lay unmoving on the ground. His skin was a darker brown than usual and his clothes were covered in ash. The thick white strands of his hair had melted into long thin lines and lay in a tangled mess.

“He’s breathing,” Juniper said.

They had to hurry. “Free the animals and meet me back here,” Evony said.

Juniper and Gretel took off through the grove of ... lemon drop trees.

Inside the cottage, the stone walls were cracked and charred. The worktable and loft, the brownies’ cupboard and the kitchen table were all burned to nothing. The counter was gone. The stove stood alone in the bare room, the sole reminder of years’ worth of memories. Her mother’s spoon wand was destroyed, as were the fairy-spelled jars.

That, along with all of her mother’s potions, might explain the forest outside.

The cellar door had been spared but was badly singed on the surface. She lifted it and saw four scared, but very much alive, people staring back at her.

“Plans have changed,” she said. “There’s been an accident, and we need to leave now.”

They followed without a word, more slowly than she liked, but no one appeared injured. As soon as they were outside, they shielded their eyes against the bright sunlight with barely a glance at Magnus. The candy forest had stolen their attention.

She wished she had time to explain what had happened, but instead she sent them on their way, urging them to travel north as quickly as possible and to *not* eat the sweets. Just in case. They probably didn’t need that reminder.

Juniper and Gretel had tied up Magnus using licorice vines, somehow managing not to rouse him, but they couldn’t count on him being unconscious for long. The vines wouldn’t hold him, but they might slow him down.

Evony had known the day would come when she would have to leave home, but she hadn’t expected it to be under such circumstances. At least they wouldn’t have to bury the whole house by hand—only now they might have a whole forest to bury.

“What about the animals?” Juniper asked.

Her heart ached at the thought of leaving them behind. “We can’t drag them along. They’ll do well enough in the forest for now.” She would get him to fly her back to fetch them as soon as possible.

Evony led them east towards the river, following a vague notion that they should cross the water to be safe from Magnus. If all went well, he would follow them and leave the four people alone so they could finally be free.

She didn’t look back. Looking back served no purpose. Her future lay ahead of her now ... somewhere. She hiked through the forest with her friends, overwhelmed by the scent of spices and fruits, sweet cakes and peppermint sticks. Somewhere in the sugary overgrowth, Cork and Broom escorted a small gingerbread man.

She hoped.

When they were far enough away from the cottage, she risked a brief call. “Broom! Cork!” She stopped and called again, listening for any response.

“We’ll look for them,” Gretel said.

Evony continued on at a walk, keeping her ears open for their return. A quarter of an hour later, she heard Cork whooping and smiled in relief.

Gretel appeared first, carrying Cork upside down by his ankle. He looked none the worse for wear, except his hair was a shocking shade of blue. Juniper flew low with both Broom and Hansel on his back and frequent glances over his shoulder.

Evony spoke to Juniper. “Put Hansel on the ground, please.” She sat on a marshmallow log and rubbed her lower back. Too much running.

As soon as his feet hit cookie crumb soil, Hansel hung his head and turned his back to her. His cookie form was similar to Magnus’s, except his hair resembled chocolate curls. Overall, he still looked like himself.

“It’s all my fault,” he said. “I’m so sorry. Those people ... and your home ... it’s all my fault.”

“Hansel, I wish you hadn’t run off earlier without hearing what I had to say,” she said, “but none of this is your fault.”

“It is.” He sank to his knees and looked at his hands. “Those people are gone because of me. All the potion destroyed. If only I hadn’t confronted him. I should have listened to you. I deserve this. I —”

“You’re doing it again.”

He finally looked at her. “Doing what?”

“Not listening to me.” She smiled to take away any sting to her words. “I have good news, which I was trying to tell you in the barn before you ran off.” She pulled the cauldron out of her apron and held it out in her hands.

His eyes widened, but he still looked confused.

She lifted out one of the potions, unwrapped it, and held it out.

Gretel gasped and dropped Cork on a spice drop mushroom. He bounced and landed on his backside with an *oof*.

Evony unstopped the bottle. “I had already changed the last four cookies back into people. They survived the explosion in the cellar and are on their way now to the village in the north.” Before Hansel could respond or object, she poured the potion over his head.

Hansel bolted to his feet. “No! What about Juniper?” Purple smoke clouded his transformation, and a minute later, he emerged unharmed and back to his normal self. He dropped to his knees again and spoke to Juniper. “I’m sorry! This was meant for you!”

Juniper whacked him in the face with his wing, nearly unseating Broom. “Calm down.” Apparently, he’d done the math and was unconcerned about Evony’s actions. “Don’t you know about the baker’s dozen? Except it wasn’t a dozen—just an extra. You know what I mean.”

Hansel looked at her for confirmation, and she held up the last potion, still carefully wrapped. He fell over with relief and leaned against her knee, clearly exhausted. “You’re amazing, you know that? Getting lost in these woods was the best thing that ever happened to me.”

She ruffled his hair and spoke to Juniper while giving the bottle a little wiggle. “What do you think?”

He groaned. “Aw, Evony. I better wait. If I end up as weak as those humans when I change, you’d never be able to drag me through the forest, and I’d make a ton of noise. Not to mention I'd make a clear trail for Magnus to follow.”

She nodded in acceptance of his decision and tucked the potion and cauldron away again. “How do you feel, Hansel?”

“Hungry.”

“You and me both,” Broom said from his seat on Juniper’s back.

When everyone looked in his direction, Juniper said, “Don’t look at me. Not a cookie, remember?”

Cork threw a cinnamon twig at him.

“Let’s go. We’ve lingered too long.” Evony took Hansel’s hand and led the group forward at a fast walk. “We’ll need as much of a head start as we can get.”

Hansel squeezed her fingers tightly. “I really am sorry.”

She grinned. “It might take a few slices of your best pie before I can really forgive you.”

Juniper landed on her shoulder, and Broom leaped over to sit with Hansel. For some reason, Gretel was still carrying Cork upside down while he giggled and held his arms out to the side like wings.

Although they heard no signs of pursuit as they traveled, they always assumed that Magnus could be just behind them. They stopped now and then to rest and drink from clear streams. The water seemed to be the only thing not affected by the explosion, so they filled their bellies with it and tried to ignore the hunger pangs.

“I came in hungry, and now I’m leaving hungry,” Hansel said with a wry smile during one of their stops.

Evony had a sudden idea. “What if we *can* eat the sweets now? Remember the fox eating the custard cream cookies we buried? And I saw a chicken eat a candy beetle and then run off, unchanged.”

“Can we risk it?” Juniper asked.

“Can we not?” She’d always intended to undo her mother’s magic, if she could. Maybe the explosion had taken care of that for her.

“Best leave it alone until we’ve got rid of that fiend,” Broom said.

“I need to know if this forest is going to pose a threat to anyone else,” she said. “We could have an even bigger mess on our hands than before.”

“I don’t think that’s going to be a problem,” Hansel said. He held a piece of chocolate bark in his hand, his jaws still working on the chunk he’d bitten off. “It’s a bit earthy, but not bad.”

Evony’s jaw dropped.

“Will you never learn?” Gretel shrieked. She buried her fists in her wispy hair as she glared daggers at Hansel.

Cork smirked and spoke in a loud whisper to Broom. “I quite like this one. Let's keep him.”

“All right, since that’s settled, let’s move along, shall we?” Gretel grabbed Cork by the ankle, accidentally dunking his head in the stream before she had him aloft. She disappeared into the canopy to hide her glitter from Magnus, muttering about stupid humans and their stupid impulses giving her a stupid nervous breakdown.

“Uh ...” Hansel dropped the chocolate and moved to follow his irate pixie. “I guess we should get going, too.”

Evony joined him, shaking her head. Relief warred with horror that he would take such a chance after what he’d just been through. “That was ... ill advised.”

He glanced sideways at her. “It’s the least I could do after—”

“If you were trying to make amends, I already said none of this was your fault.”

“Yes, but—”

“Do you feel better now?”

“Well—”

“You could have turned into a cookie again!”

“But I didn’t!”

“Oh, and that makes it all right? There were other options!” She couldn’t think of any at the moment, but there must have been other ways to find out if the sweets were safe. “Are you never going to consult me about anything? Or will you always jump in and do whatever you want?” She stormed ahead, unseating Juniper from her shoulder. He glided downward and then circled back and gathered Broom for a ride.

Overhead, Cork spoke words of reassurance to Gretel, and her tirade finally quieted.

Evony quieted, too. She’d let her fear of losing Hansel—again—make her words sharp, and she regretted it right away. His act had been rash but also selfless.

Ten minutes passed in silence, except for the warble of candy-hued birds and the strange rattle and hiss of the wind through the sugary landscape.

Eventually, Hansel strode forward until they walked side by side and whispered, “If you’re not otherwise occupied, may I ask you a question?”

She rolled her eyes at his teasing tone.

When she didn’t say “no,” he continued. “If I add chocolate cake to my best pie, would you forgive me yet again? I make the best chocolate cake.”

She chuckled despite herself. “I’m going to be the most well-fed baker, aren’t I?”

“Without a doubt.”

They walked in silence again. They’d heard no sounds of pursuit, but it was impossible to believe that Magnus wouldn’t follow them.

“You scared me,” Evony said, finally. Why was that so hard to admit? Perhaps because she couldn’t quite believe that her future and Hansel’s might be intertwined. That she could have a life beyond her mother’s cottage.

“I’ll do my best never to do that again,” he said, his tone sincere. He paused and then added, “May I ... may I ask you another question?”

She chuckled. “Anything but more cakes.”

“No cakes. But ... if it’s not too much trouble, would you allow me to take your hand? I’m not a woodsman and may get lost.”

She didn’t answer but took his hand instead, confident he wouldn’t get any more lost than she would but responding to the need in his voice. “Someone has to keep you close to keep you out of trouble.”

“I was hoping you’d say that.” He flashed a grin and squeezed her hand tightly.

As if sensing the ease in tension, Gretel descended from the canopy.

Juniper followed. “How long do you think the forest will stay this way?”

Evony pulled her hair off her neck and let a small breeze cool her skin. “From what I can tell, the spoon wand blew up along with everything else. Fairy magic mixed with potions and pixie glitter in one big explosion.”

“In other words, you have no idea,” Juniper said.

“Great,” Cork moaned. “I’m going to have blue hair for life.”

“The wildlife around here is going to get extremely fat,” Broom mused.

“At least the people of this land will never suffer famine,” Hansel observed.

After trekking through a molasses bog, they found themselves in a stretch of forest dominated by trees with pumpkin bread trunks and candied orange leaves. Sponge cake underfoot made their steps delightfully springy but left clear footprints. They stopped once to wash off the worst of the stickiness and then continued on.

Two grueling hours later, Evony thought she might never eat sweets again, but the forest had gradually begun to look more natural. A peppermint tree with real birch leaves here. A patch of green brambles with cloves in place of thorns there. Birds fluttered between trees, and a fox with a mulberry-red head peeked at them from behind a grey stump. Evony did a double take when she saw the fox, but it had already disappeared. She thought they'd found a real apple tree once but upon closer inspection discovered the fruit to be made of red candy-glass.

Finally, Evony heard the river. They stepped out of a mostly-green forest to find a wide, slow expanse of water winding between rocky shores. It was much wider, and deeper, than anticipated.

Cork stood ankle deep in the water, hands on his hips. "Now what?"

"I assumed we could wade across," Evony said. "This is supposed to be the place people go when they don't want to cross the troll's toll bridge."

"Do you think maybe those people swam?" Broom asked.

She stared blankly at the river. "I can't swim."

"Neither can I," Hansel added.

"It's quite a conundrum, isn't it?" someone said in a smooth, velvety voice.

Everyone looked around to see who'd spoken.

The mulberry-red fox watched them from the top of a log down the shore. The tip of his tail tapped slowly up and down while he gnawed on a piece of peppermint bark.

"Did ... you speak?" Evony asked. "How ...?"

"You're asking me that while traveling with a flying cookie?"

As tired and hungry as he was, Juniper replied indignantly, "I am *not* ... Evony change me now, and I'll get everyone across."

"But—"

"You'll be too weak!" Cork said. "You'll drown us!"

Suddenly, the fox's ears perked up, and he looked towards the forest. "Uh, oh," he said in a singsong voice. "Something is coming."

Magnus had found them. His crashing and cursing became audible within seconds.

Gretel fluttered in erratic circles, and Broom held his breath and blinked out of sight so that Juniper appeared to be flying alone.

There was no time to give Juniper his potion, but Evony could send him and Gretel across with the brownies to safety.

She addressed them both. "You need to get everyone to—"

Before she finished speaking, Gretel squeaked and then blasted a gust of glitter at her and Hansel so hard it reached the tree line and shook the leaves two dozen paces into the forest.

Evony looked up at Gretel. And up and up, where she hovered high over their heads. After a few moments of disorientation, she realized what had happened.

"You shrank us!" Hansel yelled, not at all pleased to be small again. At least he was still fully human this time.

"Sorry." Gretel smiled sheepishly. "I didn't know I could do that. I heard 'everyone' and panicked."

"It's brilliant!" Juniper said. "Now we can get you all across!"

They still needed to move fast. Even with his bad eyesight, Magnus was sure to see their movement when he got closer.

The fox swallowed his peppermint and then walked to the shore.

Juniper glided down next to Evony and stepped proudly over to take her on her first flight. “I can carry one of the brownies, too, and then come back for the other.”

“I have a better idea,” the fox said. When he had their attention, he continued. “I’m an excellent swimmer, and I’ve been meaning to visit a particularly nice pear grove on the other side of the river for some time. I can take you across.”

Evony stared at him. Could he be trusted? “Why would you help us?”

“I’ve watched you for a very long time at your cottage, and I find I’ve grown rather fond of you. I would hate to see you come to a bad end if there’s something I can do to assist you.”

So it *was* him she’d seen lurking around the cottage.

“Consider it payback for the lovely sweets, if you will. Come now, there’s no time for debate.” The fox made his way to the water’s edge. “I’ll take the humans—pixie magic never lasts long, you know. If you change back into your original sizes while on the dragon’s back, down goes the cookie.”

She shuddered at that image. He had a point.

Everyone else must have thought the same thing, because no one argued with the fox’s plan. Magnus’s noises had stopped, but he must have been close.

She and Hansel climbed on the fox’s back.

“Midway up should be fine,” he said. “No need to interfere with the shoulders or neck.”

Juniper reminded Broom to stop holding his breath, Gretel hefted Cork into the air, and they all set off.

As the fox waded into the river, Evony pulled up her feet behind her to keep them from dragging in the water. She gripped handfuls of fur and held on tight. Hansel sat close behind doing the same. The fox was an expert swimmer and proved to be very buoyant. His back stayed mostly out of the water so that only their knees got wet, and his tail stretched out and floated behind him.

The crossing itself was uneventful, if nerve-wracking. Juniper and Gretel made it to the opposite shore by the time the fox was halfway across. After depositing their passengers, they both flew back and hovered nearby, ready to help if needed.

“Do you think he’s given up?” Hansel asked.

They’d not seen any sign of Magnus on the shore.

“Oh, he hasn’t given up,” the fox said, panting. “He’s just been slowed down. The pixie glitter got him, too.”

“What?” Gretel looked abashed. “I shrank him, too?”

“Why didn’t *you* shrink?” Evony asked the fox.

“You could just as easily ask why your dragon didn’t shrink to the size of an ant.”

Good point, and she had no answer for either question.

“I wasn’t in the line of fire, my dear,” he clarified. “Neither was the dragon.”

Ah. Well, it was enough that Magnus had been shrunk along with them and would be delayed, possibly for good. He had no way to cross the river as far as Evony knew.

Hansel wrapped an arm around her waist and said, “Look ahead.”

The grasses on the far bank loomed closer and closer, like branchless trees, and the trees looked ... colossal. Her head spun at the sheer size of everything. She’d never understood magic, but whatever the talking fox was doing, he seemed to mean them no harm, and he soon had them safe, and mostly dry, on the other shore.

Evony brushed a bit of brown scum off the fox's shoulder as she slid to the ground. "How can we ever repay you?"

"Providing an afternoon's entertainment is enough for me." He shook off and then headed back into the water. "Well, then. I find I'm quite famished and must head back."

Hansel said, "I thought you were coming to enjoy the pears over here."

"Who can think of pears when sweets are to be had in such abundance? What I *really* want is on the other shore." The fox winked and swam away.

Cork put his hands on his hips. "I'll never understand foxes."

Broom nudged his shoulder. "That's the first step to understanding them."

Confident that Magnus would not be following them across the water for some time, if at all, the brownies gathered a pile of twigs, and Gretel lit it with a spark. Juniper found the pear grove the fox had mentioned and brought back a small fruit. Soon, they were all huddled around a comforting campfire, bellies full of roasted pear and waiting for the pixie glitter to wear off. Evony checked that the last bottle of potion was safe, but she wouldn't let Juniper use it until it was back to its proper dosage size.

Evony grew drowsy and leaned her head on Hansel's shoulder, while Broom and Gretel chatted quietly near Juniper. Whatever came next, Evony was glad to have friends by her side.

Cork sat by himself, his blue hair shining as bright as ever in the afternoon sun as he poked the fire with a stick. Suddenly, he cried out in alarm and pointed at the river. "I can't believe it! He tricked us!"

Evony shaded her eyes, and then she gasped. The fox was returning ... and carrying the miniature gingerbread man on his back.

Chapter Twelve

Evony watched as the fox inched closer and closer with Magnus on his back. It seemed having a river between them wasn't enough. Was nowhere safe?

Hansel kicked dirt over the fire, and everyone prepared to flee before the fox carried the gingerbread man straight to them.

"He tricked us!" Cork cried. "Conniving fox! You heard him say it earlier—we're nothing but an afternoon's entertainment."

Broom bolted to his feet, held his breath, and disappeared. He reappeared almost instantly looking sheepish. "We've got to go," he muttered. "Gotta go, gotta go."

"Everyone calm down for a minute," Evony said.

Gretel fluttered to Hansel's side, and he glanced at her, doing a double-take as if he'd forgotten he was her size now.

When Evony had everyone's attention, she continued. "The fox knows we can get away. We have a dragon and a pixie, and the brownies know how to get out of a tight spot."

Hansel gave Cork and Broom an appreciative glance as if in acknowledgment of their earlier rescue. "You think the fox has something else in mind?" he said.

"Who knows? Either way, Magnus is still vulnerable to water. We need to stay here. We've got him outnumbered now that we're all the same size." She let that thought sink in for a moment. "With the river behind him and us before him, he'll be trapped."

If he wanted to be human so badly, let him face a trial like a real man.

Catching on, Cork said, "We'll need something better than licorice vines to tie him up."

"Gretel, can you keep him small?" Hansel asked.

"I wouldn't count on it." She wrung her hands. "I don't know how I did it before. I can weave some of these reeds into rope, though. It shouldn't take long."

"Show me what you need," Juniper said as he sped off to help.

Five minutes later, they hid among the grasses, which wasn't hard at their size, and discussed tactics while watching the fox inch closer. Ten feet of strong, pixie-woven rope lay coiled nearby. Evony's heart thumped in her ears, and she wondered that it could be so loud when she was so much smaller. When she started chewing a nail, Hansel took her hand.

She tried not to count how many things could go wrong. Magnus was still stronger than any of them.

And furious. His voice carried across the water. "Can't you go any faster?" He huddled on the fox's back in an effort to keep every inch of him dry.

"Climb onto my shoulders, and I'll be able to swim more swiftly."

Magnus obeyed without a word and then stared ahead at his goal.

"A little higher," the fox said.

They had only a few yards left to go. Magnus edged forward, until he was nearly on the back of the fox's head. One more minute, and he would be able to leap to dry ground. His gaze bridged the distance, and he crowed triumphantly, "Flee as fast as you can, my queen! You'll never outrun me! I'm __"

Without warning, the fox moved quick as lightning.

Splash, crunch, gulp!

One moment, Magnus was there, the next he was gone. The fox had snapped him in half and swallowed him down in three bites.

Cork and Broom erupted into cheers, and Gretel celebrated with them, tossing small balls of glitter like fireworks. Juniper leaped into the air, keeping a watchful eye on the fox, who continued to swim towards them while licking his lips.

"What just happened?" Hansel said, echoing Evony's thoughts.

The fox climbed onto shore and shook water from his fur.

"When the pixie glitter wears off," Juniper said, "you're going to have a terrible stomachache."

"Not so. The bits and pieces resting in my belly now are no more than crumbs. The glamour is not only broken, it's null and void." The fox's eyes glinted with amusement. "I wouldn't recommend the same solution in your case."

How could he have such a casual attitude? Evony tried to step forward to confront him, but she couldn't move. Her toes tingled, and the feeling moved up her legs. She exchanged a look with Hansel, and then they both toppled over. He helped her stand, and she looked down at Cork and Broom dancing at her feet.

"You're tall again!" Cork shouted.

She patted her hair and arms as if to be sure and then checked the cauldron. Everything was back in order. Staring at the spot where the gingerbread man had disappeared, she said, "My mother's greatest creation ... gone just like that."

Hansel put an arm around her waist and whispered, "Your mother's greatest creation is right here."

"He's right, you know, no matter what they say about you in the village." The fox sat several yards away and watched the small party in the grass.

"Why did you ... ?" She couldn't finish the question. She wasn't sure she wanted to know the answer, either.

"Why did I eat him? He was a cookie. I was hungry." He wrinkled his nose. "Bit burnt, if you ask me."

Juniper landed on Evony's shoulder and folded his wings. "I think she means, why did you bring him over here and eat him in front of us?"

"Entertaining, no?" He grinned, revealing sharp white teeth. "Come now, I had to make sure you knew you were safe. Seeing is believing, as the saying goes. Now to see about those pears." He trotted off without a backward glance.

"Thank you" didn't seem like the right words, so Evony said, "Farewell, and ... stay safe."

Cork stopped jumping long enough to call out, "Glamour or no, I hope it doesn't disagree with your stomach!"

The fox barked a laugh as he dashed into the forest.

Evony turned to Hansel and pressed her cheek against his shoulder while he held her close. "What will you do now?"

He chuckled, his chest rumbling against hers, and pulled back ever so slightly to look into her eyes. He nudged her chin upwards with his fingers, and his gaze strayed to her lips. "I have a few ideas."

Her face warmed, and she smiled at his purposeful misunderstanding of the question.

Hansel leaned in and kissed her slowly, and she twined her arms around his neck. Juniper hovered just within eyesight, a scowl on his face. She closed her eyes and ignored him.

When Cork and Broom started taking bets on who would run out of air first, Evony spluttered a laugh and ruined the moment.

Taking it in stride, Hansel grinned. “I want you to come with me to Eastland, Evony,” he said, finally answering the question as she'd meant for him to. He glanced at Juniper, still hovering annoyingly close. “You and your jealous dragon.”

“Hey!” Juniper landed on Evony's shoulder. “Not jealous. Just questioning your timing.”

She laughed. “And the brownies?”

“Only if they promise to behave themselves,” Hansel said with a serious expression, but he couldn’t hide the amusement in his voice.

“Can’t make any such promise,” Cork said, throwing pine cones for Gretel to turn into flower petals.

Broom had wandered off and was deep in conversation with a magpie perched nearby, but he paused long enough to add, “We go where she goes. As long as you feed us well, we won’t cause too much trouble.”

“Fair enough,” Hansel mumbled. “They *are* brownies.”

Juniper cleared his throat and glanced at Evony’s apron with a nervous smile.

She’d almost forgotten! She removed the potion while he glided to the ground. After pouring it over his head and enduring one last cloud of purple smoke, she saw her childhood companion transformed before her eyes into an emerald-green, honest-to-goodness dragon.

Cork whistled in appreciation. “You’re a mountain!”

The startled magpie took to the air and landed several trees away.

Broom’s jaw dropped.

Juniper spread his wings and flapped them slowly up and down, kicking up dust and debris. The size of a large draft horse, he would easily be able to carry Evony and Hansel when the time came.

“How do you feel?” she asked.

“A little dizzy, and I’m *starving*.” He tucked his wings and sat down heavily.

“Pears!” Cork yelled and ran off, closely followed by Broom and Gretel.

Evony laughed and threw her arms around his neck, her heart bursting with joy at seeing her companion back to himself. Finally, amazingly, all of her mother’s mistakes had been made right.

They camped near the river for a week to allow Juniper time to regain his strength and practice flying on his “new” wings. Using Gretel’s pixie-woven reed rope as a makeshift harness, he took Evony up first by herself, and they were able to see the pink and purple haze of the candy forest in the distance. The borders had shrunk somewhat, and Evony remained hopeful that it would change back to normal in time.

They saw the fox twice. The second time, he informed them that their donkey had made his way to the village and was being doted on by a man in a floppy hat. The goats were thriving with the troll, and the chickens had taken up residence in the apothecary’s coop. “Most of them,” he added, with a sly wink.

The golden cauldron resumed its daily offering of coins and was generous enough to produce silvers for two weeks straight. By the time they reached Eastland, Evony and Hansel had enough for a small wedding and a modest shop in the heart of the city, where they became well-known not only for their fresh loaves, but also for their mouthwatering pies and cakes and, most especially, their gingerbread. Hansel, along with Juniper, developed a delivery system to take their wares—and day-old bread for those in need—far and wide. If all went well, another tiny baker would join the family in half a year’s time.

EVONY LEANED FORWARD, enjoying the wind in her face as Juniper glided over the sleeping city. Street lanterns sparkled below like orderly fireflies. Keeping pace beside them, Gretel sat behind Broom on a magpie, leaving a trail of orange glitter in the sky.

Cork poked his head out of the basket tied behind Juniper's saddle. "That's the last of the deliveries for tonight."

"He's sampling the merchandise again," Broom said.

"What are you talking about?" Cork held half of a poppy seed cookie in his hand and spoke with his mouth full. "You know Hansel always packs me a snack."

"Even so, you never see *me* eating on the job," Broom retorted.

"Not while you're in the air. Don't make me tell Evony about all the—"

"Be quiet and eat your cookie!" Broom gave him a warning look.

Cork laughed and dropped back down into the basket.

Juniper veered ever so slightly to the right. "Did you ever think we'd get here?" It was a statement rather than a question, and his sides rose and fell in a sigh of contentment.

If she were to answer, she would have had to say no. She had never let herself make plans past freeing the gingerbread people. One thing was certain, though. Her life now was full of more magic than she ever could have imagined.

Hansel waved to them from the rooftop as Juniper descended and landed beside him. After Evony unbuckled the saddle straps, he offered her his hand. "Pardon me, ma'am. Is there anything you need help with?"

She smiled and slid into his arms, welcoming his warmth after the brisk flight. "Juniper said I should be fine to ride for a while longer, but mounting and dismounting is becoming another matter."

"I'm always here to help," he said, resting a protective hand on her stomach. "We wouldn't want the little gingersnap to miss his daily flight."

"Or her," Gretel said, dragging Cork from the basket.

"Or their," Cork added as he emerged hanging upside-down.

Evony and Hansel stared at him, wide-eyed, and said in unison, "What?"

"What?" he repeated with a shrug. "Just a hunch."

"Don't listen to him," Broom said and began sweeping up pixie glitter to sell to the milliner's shop. With a grin, he mumbled, "Although brownies do tend to have instincts about such things."

With a startled laugh, Evony hugged her husband. No matter what happened, home would never be the same again ... and that suited her just fine.

See more books by Lea Doué at
www.leadoue.com

Read the entire Villain's Ever After Collection on Amazon!